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THE READER'S DIGEST ASSOCIATION
London, Sydney and Cape Town

FIRST EDITION

Published by
THE READER'S DIGEST ASSOCIATION LIMITED
25 Berkeley Square, London, W.1
THE READER'S DIGEST ASSOCIATION PTY. LIMITED
Reader's Digest House
86 Stanley Street, East Sydney
THE READER'S DIGEST ASSOCIATION LIMITED
Regis House, Adderley Street, Cape Town

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
HAZELL WATSON & VINEY LTD , AYLESBURY AND SLOUGH

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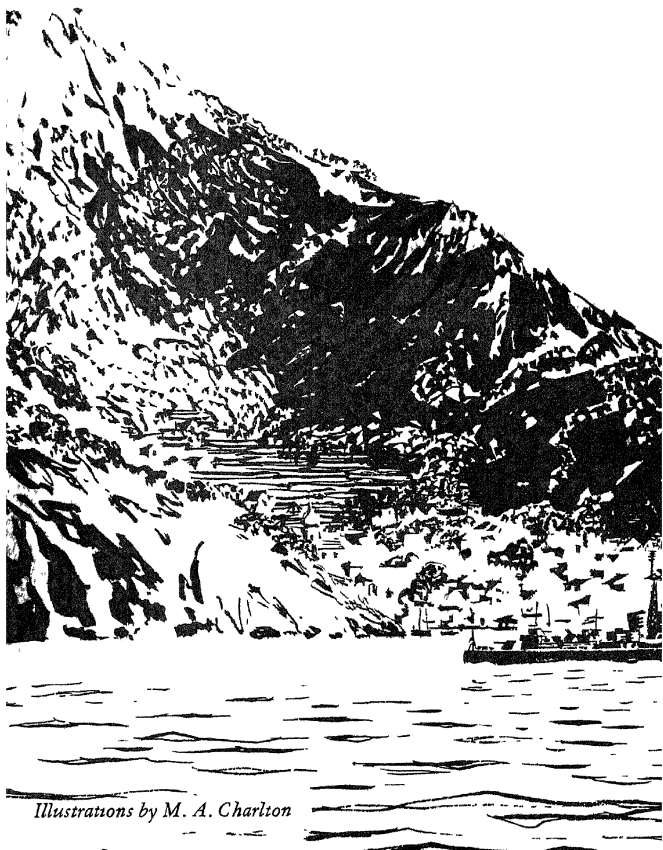
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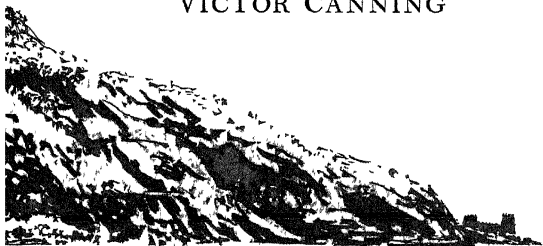
Illustrations by M. A. Charlton

THE DRAGON TREE

A condensation of the book

by

VICTOR CANNING



"The Dragon Tree" is published by Hodder and Stoughton, London

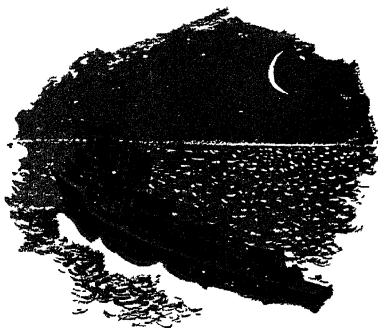
A BRITISH Army Officer must be prepared for some strange assignments, but when Major John Richmond was put in charge of three nationalist rebels in exile he did not expect to be caught up in a web of intrigue.

For the rebels—Colonel Mawzi, Hadid Chebir and Hadid's pretty English wife, Marion—confinement in the closely guarded fort on the tiny island of Mora did not end their hopes for their country's independence. Loyal nationalists still remembered their leaders and in spite of Richmond's vigilance perhaps there were ways of escape. As sinister forces were at work, Richmond found himself involved in a dangerous and tense situation which dramatically affected the lives of many innocent people.

Expertly unfolded in an exotic, colourful setting, Victor Canning's thriller builds up to a climax of violence and excitement.

"Here is the perfect tale of action which manages also to be a perfect piece of literary craftsmanship."—*Birmingham Mail*

"This is the novel of suspense at its best."
—Francis Iles in *The Guardian*



A WAY TO the left was the faint smudge of the French coast and below, shadowed by occasional drifts of cloud, the waters of the Bay of Biscay. In a little while they would hit San Sebastian and the dun-coloured, June-burnt ridges of the Pyrenees.

The air inlet above Major John Richmond hissed gently, the draught fretting at the edges of *The Times*. The main article on the centre page was headlined—*Future of Cyrenian National Leaders*. And underneath, in smaller type—*Labour Dissatisfaction*.

John smiled at that. Sitting in the Strangers' Gallery yesterday he had heard the Labour members' dissatisfaction with the statement of the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

"... the Secretary of State for the Colonies said that the Government had not yet reached a decision on the future of the Cyrenian Nationalist leaders, Hadid Chebir and Colonel Mawzi, recently captured during operations against Cyrenian National forces.

Mr. James Morgan (Llanryll, Lab.) said that as Hadid Chebir and Colonel Mawzi had now been in Government hands for more than two weeks the Opposition and, indeed, the country as a whole were entitled to know the Government's intention. Were they to be brought to trial, or did the Government intend to send them into exile? If this latter course were intended then the Opposition could not too strongly condemn this further example of vacillation"

John Richmond lowered the paper for a moment. The Government had made up its mind all right, but until the thing was done no announcement would be made. . . . The air hostess came down the gangway, holding a tray of drinks aloft expertly. She glanced at John as she passed, and his smile shadowed her own, but he was hardly aware of her. He was a long way from the present, years and years back, and at Oxford Hadid Chebir . . . He hadn't known him very well. But some of his memories stuck clearly, particularly one. A hard winter's day, the muddy ground with a crisp meringue-top of frost and in the shower-room at the back of the pavilion the whistle of water jets and a moving frieze of young men's naked bodies. One body, slim and long and pale coffee-colour, stood out against the scrubbed pinkness of the others. What was it Chebir had said? "This passion for games! In my country you are a child, and then suddenly a man. There are no games." Someone had laughed and thrown a wet towel and the coffee-coloured arms had gathered it neatly and the towel had been smartly returned. It was odd how the isolated picture stood out in his memory.

When he had left the House of Commons and gone to the War Office to see Banstead, the memory had been with him. Banstead had been at his most pompous.

"You have, no doubt, divined why I asked you to go along to the House?"

"I've twigged, yes." It amused him to see Banstead's frown when you put his words into the vernacular. "When do I leave and where do I go?"

"Tomorrow morning. San Borodon. This whole Cyrenian situation is very delicate and it's necessary to know where you are——"

"I'm going to be stuck on a small island in the Atlantic by the look of it."

"The climate is excellent. However, to come back to Cyrenia—the whole trouble there arises from the racial mixture of its peoples and its military importance in Arab-Afro and Mediterranean affairs. . . ." Banstead was delivering one of his staff course lectures and there was no stopping him. "In 1878," he went on, "we took Cyrenia over in

trust for the Sultan of Turkey, then in the war of 1914 we annexed it. There's a Governor and a Cyrenian Legislature and eventually it will be granted autonomy, but the Arabs and the Turks hate one another and the small Greek community is persecuted by both. Hadid Chebir's father started the trouble by raising a pro-Arab army and there was an uprising in 1935. Since old Chebir's death in 1937 young Hadid Chebir and Colonel Mawzi have kept the Cyrenian National Army and the trouble going and have opposed any reasonable constitution. We were very lucky to capture the two."

"And now you have them in the bag, you don't quite know what to do with them?"

"We need a breathing space. In the meantime . . ." Banstead had smiled suddenly and lapsed into a more human manner; ". . . they are going to be your babies, and I'm glad it's you and not me. The three of them are dynamite."

"Three?"

"Madame Chebir has elected to go into voluntary exile with her husband."

"That doesn't surprise me." The English girl who had married Hadid Chebir and identified herself with Cyrenia was well known and through the Press had become a sympathetic figure.

"All the arrangements have been made for you. Pick them up as you go out. There is one thing, however, I should explain. Some days before these two were captured one of our intelligence boys in Cyrenia was murdered. We know he was on his way to report to the G.O.C. out there because he'd got important information. . . . He never did manage to spill it. Since you'll be more or less living with these people we want you to keep your eyes and ears open. Apart from the general report you'll make to the San Borodon Governor, Sir George Cator, each week, you'll also write direct and personally to me when you feel like it."

AT THE Madrid airport there was an hour's wait for Gibraltar passengers. John went to the restaurant and sat on the terrace in the sun watching the airport activity. It was hot and the air full of the sharp

smell of burnt-up earth and Spanish tobacco smoke. A shadow fell across his table and a man's voice, pleasant and educated but with a slight regional background to it, said, "Major Richmond?"

A dark-haired, good-looking young man of about twenty-eight was standing by the table. He wore a smart, well-cut dark blazer with monogrammed silver buttons, sharply creased flannel trousers and suede shoes. "It is Major Richmond, isn't it?" he said, and with a flash of good-natured boyishness underlined with understanding he ran on. "You passed me in the corridor outside Banstead's office the day before yesterday—I must have been forward of you on the plane. I'm Neil Grayson, A.D.C. to Sir George Cator."

"Oh, yes. . . ." John stirred slightly and with one hand made a faint movement towards an empty chair. Grayson sat down, slipped his hand into his breast pocket and slid his passport across the table. John opened it.

"Shocking photograph," said Grayson. John turned over the pages of the passport slowly.

The deliberateness and caution irritated Grayson. But he was careful not to show it. You got nowhere by showing your less flattering reactions to other people. He watched John Richmond, matching the things he knew about him already with his first impression of the man himself. He marked the comfortable tweed suit, so well cut that it could be worn a little untidily on the big frame; a gold wristlet-watch with a worn strap, the lilies of the Magdalen College tie, and the flash of a crested signet ring as the passport was returned to him.

"It's quite a good photograph. Mine looks like a criminal with a hangover" It was said easily, wiping away all formality. An easiness of manner, thought Grayson, which he had had to fight for and which came naturally to Richmond.

"We've some time to wait, sir. Would you like a coffee?"

"Thank you."

Over coffee Grayson said, "I've been on leave, but because of this business I've been called back. Tonight I shall be with you on the destroyer *Dunoon*."

"I see." And then, making it quite clear that there was no wish to

talk more about official business in an open café, "Do you know Madrid?"

"Not well "

"Pity we haven't more time here. We could have run in and had a look at the Prado My mother used to drag me round it when I was a boy."

Without envy—he'd long learned to keep that out of the way—Grayson thought of his own mother. She'd dragged him round too, to help carry her shopping from the Co-operative Stores and to deliver her dress-making bundles to people's houses. Her ambition for him had been no less fierce than his own . . . a State Scholarship to Oxford and then a brilliant First and eventually the Colonial Office and now, but only as a further step on the ladder, A.D.C. to Sir George Cator. . . .

A loudspeaker spat and crackled and then announced the departure of the Gibraltar plane. As they walked out together to the waiting Viscount, John was thinking of something Banstead had said about Grayson. "Grayson is a thruster. He's going to finish up in Parliament . . . the Cabinet. He'll use any hold to climb." Well, good luck to him, anyway, at least he wanted something badly.

In the plane Grayson sat opposite John across the gangway. They talked for a while desultorily and then John tried to sleep. He'd left his home in Kent very early that morning to drive up to the Air Terminus in London. Normally he would have stayed in town the night, but this job had been sprung on him suddenly and there were last minute details to arrange at Sorby Place with his farm bailiff and the housekeeper. On a job like this he might be gone for a couple of years. . . . He shut his eyes seeing in his mind the early June dawn with a wisp of mist floating low over the smooth stretch of the village green and the dark plugs of the yews bold against the light grey stone of the church He went away and he came back, and nothing seemed to change. He had lived at Sorby Place all his life and his family for donkey's years before him . . . one family and several centuries in the same house It was a pretty, placid, even boring picture. Maybe what he lacked was the thing Grayson had, a burning ambition, or something like that.

Faced with the problem, he tackled it. It was as simple as A B C you can't live alone. But so far he had never found the right woman. . . . Almost certainly some of the fault was his. A man's self-sufficiency had appealed to a natural, masculine selfishness. But now he knew that he didn't want to go on alone. And with a military pragmatism he decided that when this job was done he would marry and have children. It was a good answer to the problem, but—he smiled to himself—incomplete.

Across the way Neil Grayson watched him. He was a big man, but nothing of his bigness sprawled or sagged. The light brown hair was cut short and there was a slight bleaching at the temples—he was near forty. His face interested Neil. It was the better type of army face; square and with a strong sense of repose and deliberation. When this man gave an order he meant it and showed it without any touch of dictating. Drinking their coffee at the airport he had been intrigued by the alertness of the blue eyes when Richmond smiled. He knew Richmond hadn't done Regimental duty for a long time. He marked him now as a man who obviously had influence in his Parliamentary constituency, a Conservative because it had never occurred to him that he could be anything else . . . a man whose friendship could be useful when the time came for influence.

IT WAS a still night. A pale slip of moon hung low over her own reflection on the smooth water. Dropping behind them were the lights of Gibraltar. The only sounds were routine and domestic, making of H M.S. *Dunoon* a little world of contented isolation on the dark waters. Faintly from the mess deck came the soft sound of an accordion, underscored with the low throb of the engines.

Sitting in his bridge shelter Lieutenant-Commander Edward Burrows, D.S.O., Teddy Burrows to his friends, said, "Don't pretend to understand the political ins and out of this kind of thing. Got a feeling, too, that the big boys aren't all that sure of what they're doing."

"This situation is a pretty clear one," said John Richmond. He was changed now into uniform, bush shirt, drill trousers and a lightweight tunic.

"Don't try to explain it to me. If a man's a nuisance get rid of him. Cut off his head or lock him up in the Tower. That's all there is to it." Burrows grunted and gave a violent sniff. "Everybody doubled-up to make room for a lot of Wogs. Even bringing his damned harem with him . . ." He laughed, the sound breaking through the quiet night. He was a big, sprawling, good-natured man and when he laughed his body shook to its foundations.

"There's no harem, as you know," said John. "Only his wife, and she's English."

"So I heard. What's he doing with an English wife, eh?"

"Much the same as any man does with any wife, I imagine." John smiled. "She didn't have to come with him, you know."

"Touching," snorted Burrows. "And what about this Colonel Mawzi? He's a first-class snake by all accounts."

John grinned. "He's a first-class soldier. Getting him in the bag with Hadid Chebir was a stroke of luck."

"Hadid Chebir. . . ." Burrows sighed. "They do have names."

"His name's part of the trouble. When his father was killed the old man's reputation couldn't be escaped. In a place like Cyrenia the name alone can put a couple of thousand men under arms—"

"Don't bother with the staff course lecture. I'm content just to ferry him to San Borodon. After that, he's all yours. Though, personally, I'm sorry for you having to play jailer."

Later, lying in his cabin, John found the word "jailer" sticking in his mind. Actually the whole affair was high-handed, he thought. But it had to be. That was the dilemma of politics. You kept in sight some large, rather shapeless idea of good, but to achieve it you were forced a long way from morality, even from justice. . . . He was glad that he had nothing to do with that part of it.

He got four hours sleep and was back on the bridge at the first dawn light. Burrows was there with his Number One, Lieutenant Imray. Grayson was wedged in a corner wrapped in a large tweed coat. There was a lot of bustle and movement of men, orders being shouted and the *click, click* of an Aldis lamp. The sea had a dark, oily shine.

Grayson said, "There she is, over there."

John made out a trail of smoke and the dark hull shape about a mile ahead. They closed up rapidly and very soon the two ships were lying less than a hundred yards apart. The other, a steam yacht, was flying the Cyrenian flag and a small motor launch was already being swung out on the davits. When she reached the water a gangway was lowered, and there was a passage of men up and down it carrying cases into the launch.

"Come on, Richmond. We'd better make up the reception committee," said Burrows.

The *Dunoon's* gangway went down as they reached the quarter-deck, and the launch bore in towards them with a little white bone of broken water at her bows. The shadows of Burrows and his officers stretched long across the deck, and the little wind that had come up with the dawn flirted gently at the wide collars of the ratings. Then the party from the yacht came up the gangway. The reception was very correct, very formal, and within ten minutes the *Dunoon* was heading west for the Straits of Gibraltar with the San Borodon islands forty-eight hours ahead of her.

THERE WERE four of them. In the ward-room they made a silent, patently hostile group at the far end of the long table. Hadid Chebir wore an old raincoat with the collar turned up and a green scarf was wrapped about his throat. To his left sat Colonel Mawzi in khaki drill trousers and tunic. On his shoulder tabs were badges of rank unfamiliar to John, a scimitar surmounted by an eagle. . . . The Cyrenian National Army. To Hadid Chebir's right sat his wife. John could see little of her face because her head was bowed. Behind them stood their servant, a small, elderly man with a grey growth of stubble light against his brown skin. He wore a little black skull-cap, a white tunic and tight black trousers. His feet and ankles were bare.

For the moment, to John, they were just a group of people without much separate personality. Even Hadid Chebir's face was no more than a hazy extension of his distant Oxford recollection of the man. Feeling the stiffness in him induced by their hostility, yet anxious to keep all parade ground manner from his voice, he said, "Captain

Burrows and his officers and I will do all we can to make you comfortable while you're aboard. There is a cabin for Madame Chebir and her husband. And one for you, Colonel. Your servant will be looked after on the lower deck."

Colonel Mawzi stood up. He was a very short, neat-looking man, well into his fifties though the dark hair, brushed back brutally, showed no sign of greyness. He was hard and dedicated, so full of purpose that one half-expected to hear the faint hum of some inner dynamo that powered him. The lean, wedge-shaped face looked as though it had been sliced into shape with a dozen rapid knife slashes. The only softness was in the extraordinary length of the eyelashes that curled above his dark eyes gracefully.

"The cabin arrangements must be altered," he said. "Madame Chebir is very exhausted and would prefer to be on her own. I will share the cabin with Hadid."

"As you wish. Your meals you will take here alone. As the weather is hot a small portion of the deck has been reserved for you."

"How long will it be before we reach San Borodon?"

"Roughly two days to Port Carlos."

"And then?"

"The arrangements for your . . ." John hesitated, rejecting the word "detention," and before he could go on Colonel Mawzi without humour or charm said:

"Let us call it accommodation, Major."

"All this will be explained by Sir George Cator, the Governor. I shall accompany you wherever you go. Anything in my power to do for you——"

John got no further than that. At this moment Madame Chebir stood up quickly. "For God's sake," she cried, "let's finish with all this! All right, anything in your power you'll do. You'll be nice and polite to us and if the bath water's cold we complain to you. And if we don't behave you'll put us on bread and water——"

Hadid Chebir's hand came up and gripped her tightly on the elbow. She was breathing heavily from her outburst. John could see that she was close to tears. She was a tall woman, little more than thirty, and

more attractive than her photographs. She stood there, her face alive with emotion. This was the almost legendary Madame Chebir, John thought. The woman who was said to have "Cyrenia" carved on her heart. He liked the look of her face, it had force and feeling.

"I can't promise about the plumbing in Mora," he said easily. "But I'll see you don't get bread and water."

Hadid Chebir smiled and his hand dropped slowly from her elbow, but he still said nothing. It was Colonel Mawzi who spoke.

"Madame Chebir is overwrought. She has had a very difficult time."

"I understand," said John.

"He understands!" She laughed and raised her eyebrows with a sudden comical expression. "The very correct Major Richmond understands." She turned away from the table and moved towards the door. "I should like to go to my cabin."

John drew back the curtain from the doorway for her. Neil Grayson was standing outside.

John said, "Madame Chebir is going to her cabin. Would you show her? The one which was to have been for Colonel Mawzi."

Grayson gave Madame Chebir a little bow as she came to the doorway. She stopped for a moment and looked at John. He saw her hand go up and touch one temple with a weary gesture. A little turn of sudden anger twisted in him. . . . She shouldn't have been mixed up in all this. He thought she was going to speak to him, saw her begin to, then she thought better of it and went through the doorway to Grayson.

When they had gone Hadid lifted his head for the first time full towards John. It was a fine face, lean, intelligent, the eyes deep sunk, the skin taut and lighter now than John remembered from Oxford, but the same face grown older, the remembered vitality replaced by a severe nobility. He said in a slightly husky but pleasant voice:

"We are men, Major Richmond, and understand what is happening. But my wife . . ." Just for the moment the shoulders lifted and it marked all the distinction he drew between men and women. "She feels strongly for me and shows it. You must not think her rudeness to you was personal." He smiled for an instant and went on, "She does not understand the politeness and respect men often feel for their enemies."

All the time the man spoke John waited for some shadow of recognition. But the dark deep-set eyes weren't recognizing him as any other than a figure of authority and restraint.

CLOSE to A turret Lieutenant Imray and Neil Grayson had their backs to the port guard-rail. A couple of seamen in overalls were slapping grey paint over the armour-casing of the gun and whistling gently. The sun was well up now and there was a growing strength in it.

Imray was young, and very much in love with a doctor's daughter in Herefordshire. Grayson who had known him for the past six months, while the *Dunoon* had been stationed at Port Carlos, thought he was an engaging, half-baked adolescent.

"Anyone can understand what she's done," Imray was saying. "She loves her husband, so she sticks by him. What I do find odd is why she should have married a man like that. . . . You know, not European? Must cut her off from her family and friends."

Grayson chuckled. "She hasn't got any family and friends. Not the way you understand things. Her father's a window-cleaner in Swindon. He'll get free beer at the pub on this story for a week. She was on her own from about the age of sixteen, worked at a draper's in Swindon and then to London and was a ribbon girl at Harrods——"

"How do you know all this?"

"Oh, wake up, Imray. You don't think the authorities would dump this lot on San Borodon without briefing us. She was at Harrods when she first met Hadid. He was at the London School of Economics. They never looked back. I don't blame him. She's a fine-looking girl and she's learned how to talk and walk and dress and behave——"

"But that's the point. She's so attractive she could have done well for herself——"

Grayson gave a little snort of impatience.

"Listen, Hadid Chebir is a highly cultured, intelligent man. He's not a native as you would call it. And he's worth half a million. Show me a girl with a counter job who can do better than that. And don't forget——his mouth gave a humorous twist as he fired the shaft——"she loved him. Love conquers all, colour, race and creed."

THERE WAS a water reflection through the port-hole dancing on the wall above her bunk. In a row of ugly pipes there was an intermittent clanking sound. For a moment in the ward-room Marion Chebir knew she had been on the point of letting go. She had felt battered and nervous and ready to scream. Hadid's grip on her arm had stopped that. Two years . . . and everything had changed. The Hadid who had taken her to Cyrenia, taken her everywhere, opened a new world for her and given her a new personality, had gone. The Hadid whose hand came out, fingers biting into her flesh, had nothing for her.

He had no real need of her now. But Mawzi had insisted that she come. Politically her presence with them was important. Hadid Chebir's British wife was a legend all the world knew. In the old days she had worked for Cyrenia, entertained and turned on the charm when they wanted money from someone, and once or twice she had even shared their campaigns, riding hard with them and living rough. So now she had obeyed the two of them; hypnotized by the past and unable to deny the force behind the great loyalty of her love for Hadid as he had once been. What would have happened if she had stuck out against coming, refused to budge from Tunis to come to them? As though she could . . . she laughed drily to herself. When Hadid and Mawzi wanted something they took a lot of stopping.

She lay back and put her palms under her head and her hair pushed up by her fingers lay dark against the white pillow. If anyone had ever told her as a girl that she would be here, that so many things would have happened to her. . . .

When she had met Hadid nothing her family could say made any difference. She could see them sitting round the kitchen table in the Swindon council house. Already she was a stranger to them with her London ways and her voice almost free of the Wiltshire accent. Dear Mum, how worried she had been, with that little tremble of the upper lip which meant she was near to tears, the movement which brought her father's hand out to give his wife's arm a rough caress. "Cheer up, Ma. Why shouldn't she marry him? He's a nice chap and he can't 'elp 'is colour. What's colour anyway? He ain't got no more than a nice sunburn."

But Mum couldn't see it. With her nice ways and talk she could have married a bank clerk, done well for herself, and they would all have been proud of her before the neighbours. But the neighbours couldn't understand Hadid. He was a foreigner, a native. Hadid had never known how close she had come to not marrying him because of her mother . . . the childish, anxious woman, full of courage although she was so fearful, who kept her little bits of household budget money in envelopes on top of the kitchen mantelpiece.

What would her family say now, she wondered, when they read the news? Not a great deal, perhaps. But the feeling would be there. Her mother putting on her hat and going down to the butcher's shop . . . and that upper lip tight to stop the tremble as she faced the other women. . . .

She was suddenly, bleakly full of homesickness as she pictured it all happening.

CHAPTER TWO

HEY GAVE no trouble. Most of the time they spent in their cabins or else under the deck awning that had been rigged up for them. Even when they were all three together there was little conversation between them. Only Colonel Mawzi seemed watchful and restless. He neither read nor slept during the day, and sometimes he would get up and walk the small length of deck, going to and fro like a caged animal.

The first night John went to his cabin, wrote his official diary of the day's procedures and after that one of the more personal documents which Banstead had asked for.

Trying to put himself in Banstead's place and wondering what would interest him most, he could pick out nothing except his comment about Madame Chebir:

Her manner I found a little puzzling. That Hadid or Colonel Mawzi should be played out after being on the run in the El Geffa hills for a week I can understand. But they show little signs of it. Madame Chebir, however, gave the impression of someone under strain. Yet we know

she was in Tunis when they were caught and immediately flew back to Cyrenia to join her husband and chose voluntary exile with him. As you know, I'm not very hot on female psychology, or any other, but when you choose to go to prison on principle, it seems odd to be immediately bitchy to the first prison warder (me, old boy) that you meet

John locked the report away in his brief-case and sat back, thinking about the girl. All the afternoon she had sat under the awning in a yellow linen dress and a light scarf round her shoulders. At one point he noticed that she had kicked off her sandals. It was a small thing but it put her comfortably back into the category of so many other women he had known. They were always kicking off their shoes under restaurant tables, in theatres . . . and then you had to get down with a cigarette lighter to look for them. Suddenly a little spasm of irritation took him. She was a fool. No English girl with an ounce of sense should have married Hadid. By the time he'd left Oxford and gone on to the London School of Economics it was quite clear what was in store for him. Cyrenia had killed and made a martyr of his father and he couldn't avoid the mantle falling on him.

He got up and went out on deck for a breath of fresh air. It was a warm, mild night with a slight north wind blowing. They were well through the Straits and heading into the Atlantic on a south-westerly course for the San Borodons.

THE SAN BORODONS had passed from Spain to Portugal in 1640 and then to England on the marriage of Charles II to Catherine of Braganza. They consisted of two islands, San Borodon, which was roughly pear-shaped, about fifty miles long and nearly twenty miles broad at its widest point; and Mora, which was circular, about five miles in diameter, and lay about ten miles due south of San Borodon, forming with its parent island a rather plump exclamation mark.

There was a thriving banana export trade on the island of San Borodon, and vines, tobacco and sugar were also important crops. From the sea the fishermen drew large catches of cod which were salted and dried and sent to Spain and Portugal. The island of Mora, where the prisoners were to be held, was much less developed.

An attempt to attract tourists to the islands had failed. Chiefly volcanic in origin, their coastline rose sheer and broken, and the only beaches were short, rough stretches of coarse black lava sand. The roads were bad, and so was the one hotel in Port Carlos. Also the smell of drying cod when the wind was in the south took a little getting used to. Sir George Cator had forgotten all about it. But to his daughter, Daphne—who was Lieutenant-Commander Burrows's wife as well—its pungency seemed never to decrease, though she had been staying with her father ever since the *Dunoon* had been stationed at Port Carlos.

Wind or no wind Daphne Burrows could smell the fish. There were times when she imagined that everything smelt of it . . . her clothes, the food she ate and even her skin. Those were the bad times . . . the times when her sense of frustration, of being held down when she desperately wanted to spread her wings and fly, made her particularly nervous.

Looking down now from the terrace of Government House where she was having breakfast with her father, Daphne could see the flying-boat which brought the official mail on the far side of the harbour. Last night, with the heat of the day still radiating from the ground, she had driven out with the captain of the flying-boat to Dancey's restaurant. Dancey's lay in a small bight of the coast and a terraced garden dropped to a concrete swimming apron from which one could dive into three fathoms of clear water. Her companion was a young Squadron Leader and they had swum before dinner, both of them exhilarated. In the darkness of the water they had kissed. That was all that she allowed. He wasn't what she wanted, but to take the edge off the boredom of Port Carlos she permitted herself so much. It was a thing she had drifted into because of the disappointment of her own marriage and she was tired of it already. Marriage with Teddy Burrows had promised her everything—but when he had decided to stay in the Navy after all things had begun to fall apart. She had known he was not the kind of man to get real promotion in the Navy. Now she still had love and affection for him . . . but something had gone. It was odd, really.

She wondered how she could tell her father that she meant to leave Teddy Burrows . . . not just a separation, but a divorce. Her father

would be shocked at first. He was very fond of Teddy and imagined that their marriage was a great success. However, given the right moment she could get anything from him. For a moment she was uneasy with the frankness of her thoughts. She loved Teddy, as much as she could, and she had a very deep love for her father. She wouldn't want to hurt either of them—but she had her own life to think about and if it had to be re-shaped then she must do it, tactfully and cleverly. Sir George was a man with a rare but violent temper. She mustn't risk arousing that. . . . He gave her a generous allowance, and he had considerable wealth. It would be idiotic to jeopardize either his affection or support.

These breakfasts on the terrace were a ritual with them. It was then that they talked things over, made their plans. But this morning she knew after five minutes that it would be useless to try and talk to him about herself. She saw that he was excited about this Hadid Chebir affair. He was the Governor. They would be his responsibility and he loved responsibility and importance.

He was saying, "You're not really interested in politics, Daphne, but since these people are coming here you ought to know a little about their background. If only"—he cocked a white eyebrow at her and smiled fondly, teasing a little—"for conversational purposes."

"Of course," she said and, fixing her eyes on the far peak of Tower Hill away south of the town, she stopped listening.

Sir George Cator was a short, stocky man of about sixty, who looked like a kindly, but distinguished baboon. He was bald, except for a few long strands of dark hair that streamed in a curious sweep over the top of his scalp, and he had a habit when talking of reaching up with the palm of his hand and patting them as though to assure himself they were still there.

". . . the Opposition, of course, are making all the trouble they can in the House. Any stick to beat a donkey. Everyone wants self-determination for Cyrenia, eventually . . . but it's got to be worked out justly. . . . Are you listening, Daphne?"

"Of course."

Her eyes travelled down the slopes of Tower Hill, swept across the town and then out to sea. The *Dunoon* was due in some time that morning.

Sir George went on talking, his voice full and authoritative . . . "The Cyrenian National party is illegal and while it exists there is little hope of any lasting solution. . . ."

He stopped and leaned forward. Daphne was staring down at Port Carlos, its pink and yellow walls vivid under the morning sun, and her face was blank. He smiled comfortably. His girl. Day-dreaming again. He watched her for a moment, taking pleasure in his appraisal of her. What was Daphne now? Twenty-seven? She was tall, with a model's figure, and her skin was jewel-clear. But that light-blond hair was the thing. You could almost hear the sunlight purring over it. He saw her reach absently for a cigarette from the box on the table and he held out his lighter.

As she looked at him over the top of the flame, they both smiled suddenly and he said affectionately, "You were miles away."

"Sorry, Daddy."

"No need to be. It's dull stuff. Don't see why any woman should be concerned with it. Though I must say we were lucky to put Hadid Chebir and Mawzi in the bag. The wife's English, you know."

Daphne made a mouth. "She'll love Mora," she said, and went on, "What's this Major Richmond like?"

"Don't know him. Knew his father. He was at Sandhurst with me." He pulled a letter from his pocket, cleared his throat a little to indicate a change of subject and handed it to Daphne. "This was in the mail. It's confidential . . . between us of course. You know how I value your opinion on this kind of personal thing, and you've had a fair chance of summing young Grayson up."

Daphne took the letter and read it carefully. It was from an old friend of her father's, the chairman of a large group of chemical industries and also an extremely influential man at the Central Conservative Office. He wanted a frank report on Grayson. The young man had been noted . . . he had ambition tempered by a wise control and a diplomatic manner. A constituency could be found for him. . . . It

didn't matter that he had no money. If he came into politics there would be no trouble in finding him something with the chemical group. One had to look to the future, and the young men of real promise must be helped along . . . etc., etc., thought Daphne.

She handed the letter back to her father and was silent for a while. She liked Grayson. She guessed that he liked her. Just now and again she caught a look from him, but he had always been very proper, polite, helpful, but never playing a card wrong.

"Well?" Her father questioned.

"You know the answer," she said. "I'd give him ten out of ten for everything. No," she corrected herself, "there's only one thing. He does tend to be just a little flamboyant at times."

"Yes, yes . . . but time will take that out of him. Or maybe the right wife. He's come up from nothing, no background. A man like that needs the right kind of wife perhaps more than money."

Daphne said nothing. But behind the pretty face with its firm, rounded chin an ice-cold thought had suddenly formed. She saw Grayson now more vividly and realistically than ever before. She was the kind of wife he needed. They both had ambition, but she had background.

Instinctively, she knew that she could put it to Grayson, coldly, like a business deal and he would appreciate it, being neither shocked nor offended. She knew she would do it, but . . . the other things had to be right.

She stood up, stretching her arms against the sun, a tall figure in green canvas trousers and a loose silk shirt, and she smiled at her father as she bent to kiss him.

"You won't mention this letter to Grayson, of course?"

"Good Lord, child, no. It must come from the other end after I've written about him. But I'm glad for the boy's sake."

"So am I."

He patted her hand as she stood by him. She was a good girl, warm, generous-hearted and a great comfort to him. It would have been a great shock to him if he could have had a transcript of her thoughts in the last few minutes.

IT WOULD have been less of a shock to Lieutenant-Commander Burrows. On the bridge of the *Dunoon* now he was thinking of his wife. Quite early on things had gone a little wrong between them. Not enough for other people to notice, perhaps. At the time he'd married her he had decided to leave the Navy and go into the City with his brother who was partner in a wealthy firm of stockbrokers. At the last moment—in fact on the return from his honeymoon—he had balked at the idea and stayed with the Navy because it was the one thing that meant anything to him. Daphne hadn't liked it. He realized now that she had been influenced in her choice of him by the fact that he was going into the City, that their life would be in London, and though he loved her, and was happy and contented as things were, he could feel she wanted more.

Maybe in the end it would all sort itself out. Sir George had been delighted at the marriage. The families had known one another for ages. Daphne would never do anything drastic like leaving him. . . . Upset the old boy too much. Anyway, she was too fond of him for that, and he of her. . . .

His eye fell on Marion Chebir coming out from the awning to stare at the growing shape of San Borodon on the horizon. Lord, women . . . they were odd creatures. This girl must be wishing surely that she'd kept her nose out of all this trouble.

Marion Chebir, passing along the deck, looked up and saw him watching her. A bluff, grumpy, comfortable man, she thought . . . well set in his life. She turned off the deck to go to her cabin and Major Richmond, who was about to come up the gangway, saw her and stepped back, waiting below. As she negotiated the last three rungs, he put up his hand and took her by the elbow to help her.

She said, "Thank you."

He gave a slight movement of his head, but instead of passing on she stood there. "Do we go ashore at San Borodon, Major?" she questioned.

"No, Madame. The Governor will come off in a launch. The *Dunoon* will be leaving for Mora this afternoon."

It was odd how when some people called her "Madame" it made her feel about sixty-five, but this man threw it away.

"The Governor comes with us to Mora?"

"No. Just me."

There was the hint of a smile as though he were humorously apologizing for the paucity of ceremony.

Marion Chebir smiled, too, but with intent and said: "I understand you were at Magdalen with Hadid?"

Just for a moment John showed his surprise. So Hadid had remembered.

"Yes, I was. I only knew him slightly."

"He remembers you. Perhaps I ought not to mention it, but it's unlikely that he will acknowledge the fact to you. Understandably," her face momentarily became unfriendly, severe, "he is in no mood to recall his past in England. . . ."

"I quite understand. And thank you for mentioning it, Madame."

He was very correct, very British, she thought. This was what his class had above everything else, good manners.

She'd gone out with men in London like Major Richmond and Lieutenant-Commander Burrows; polite, even when they were wild, the kind whose attentions were the same to a shop-girl as they were to a débutante—except that the débutantes knew their families and the shop-girls never would.

"Also," she said spontaneously, "I apologize for losing my temper when we met"

"Please. . . ."

To avoid his embarrassment and her own, she moved on towards her cabin. She would like to have stopped and talked about Hadid at Oxford . . . that was before she had met him

Hadid had a good memory. He never forgot a face or a place. She opened her small travelling-case and pulled out a thick, black-covered notebook. Its pages were filled with a close shorthand script. It was her own shorthand but one would have needed a knowledge of Arabic to transcribe it.

She sat on the edge of the bed and began to read at random from the notebook and the pleasures of the past came refreshingly and soothingly back to her.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DUNOON dropped anchor just inside the harbour mouth at noon, and ten minutes later Sir George Cator came out in a launch. Accompanied by Burrows, John, Grayson and the Chief of Police he went to the ward-room where Hadid Chebir, his wife and Colonel Mawzi were waiting for him.

John announced formally, "His Excellency, the Governor of the San Borodons, Sir George Cator, K.C.M.G."

The introductions were made, Sir George, stiff and very correct, giving the impression that he did not regard this as an occasion for anything except strict protocol.

He started to read the formal notice of exile and detention, the weighty opening phrases trundling out like heavy boulders being rolled over resounding boards.

"Her Majesty's Britannic Government under the powers vested in it"

And then their individual names which somehow made all three seem even more strangers and more remote.

"Hadid Ben Sulamon Chebir, merchant——"

That, thought John, was unnecessary, almost a calculated gibe. What jackass in Whitehall had tacked that on? The Chebirs were merchants, it was true, but they were also a family of rank.

". . . his wife, Marion Edith Chebir"

He saw the girl glance at Hadid, but Hadid and Colonel Mawzi both stood stiff and uncompromising, remote from the whole thing, and in this little ward-room they achieved a tremendous dignity.

"Fadid Sala Mawzi, farmer——"

John felt anger stir in him. Mawzi was a born soldier, that he owned ten acres of orange grove meant nothing. To call him a farmer was stupid and insulting. John was full of sympathy as Mawzi glanced at Sir George and said sharply:

"My rank is Colonel, your Excellency."

Sir George looked up from the proclamation paper, and John had an idea that he, too, realized its stupidity, but he gave no sign.

"In what army?" he asked curtly.

"The Cyrenian National Army."

"Her Majesty's Government does not recognize its existence."

Colonel Mawzi shrugged his shoulders and smiled briefly. "Odd. Her Majesty's Army has been fighting it for the last six years or more."

Sir George went on with his reading.

"To be detained at Her Majesty's pleasure in the Fortress of San Sebastian on the island of Mora in Her Majesty's Colony. . . Notwithstanding that Her Majesty may from time to time revoke, alter, add to or amend this Order . . ."

Which means, John thought, that if they ever decide it would be wiser to bring Chebir and Mawzi to trial instead of isolating them in the Atlantic, then they could. But at the moment a trial would cause such a rumpus in Cyrenia that they daren't risk it. Tuck them away and forget them and, with luck, time might produce an answer for Cyrenia. He couldn't see it. He was sure that these two had no intention of being tucked away and forgotten.

Sir George Cator finished, folded the paper and looked up directly at the three.

"Major Richmond here is the Commandant of Fort San Sebastian. He will act as my representative and you will be entirely under his orders." He paused for a moment and then in a shade less formal voice asked, "Any questions?"

For a while none of them said anything. Then Hadid said, "Your Excellency, I would like to point out that in the statement you have





just read our removal from Cyrenia is stated to be for reasons of good government and the maintenance of order. If there are specific charges against us they should be brought and we are willing to stand trial in Cyrenia. Until this happens we must regard our detention here as illegal, unjustified and a direct infringement of our rights as individuals. I wish this protest to be made to Her Majesty's Government."

"In that case you must put it in writing and I will see that it is forwarded to the proper authorities."

It won't do you any good, thought John, and you know it. For the moment Hadid Chebir was playing the martyr. But don't forget, he told himself, the killings in Cyrenia, the little Turkish shopkeepers and farmers who were burnt out, the British troops shot in the back and the police jeeps that went sky-high from land-mines. Chebir had that side to his discredit.

After the prisoners had left the ward-room, the others went forward to the deck awning where the mess steward had laid out a table with drinks. Sir George was given a pink gin, and relaxed.

He said to Burrows, "Teddy, you stay at Mora until Richmond has had a look round and settled himself in," and then, turning to John, went on: "Unofficially I've been told to allow them a reasonable amount of liberty. But any privileges you grant them must be in line with security. . . . We don't want them' flying the coop."

"I should think they'd find it difficult to get away," Teddy Burrows said. "They'd have to have outside help. Not so easy, that. Most of the shipping round here is regular stuff . . . banana boats and the odd liner on the South American run. We've got a patrol pattern worked out for the *Dunoon* . . . We'll have our finger on everything."

Sir George put down his glass. "All right, then, let's go ashore, Neil. Get your things aboard the launch."

In five minutes they were gone.

TWO HOURS later the *Dunoon* dropped anchor off the little village of Mora from which the small island took its name. Mora clustered at the northern tip of the island. On a clear night, looking north, the revolving lighthouse beam on the southernmost point of San Borodon could be seen.

The whole island was dominated by the great peak of a dead volcano, rising about five thousand feet and sliced off untidily at the top like an egg. John could see two great ridges running down from it to meet the sea in tall cliffs. Within the rough flanks of these ridges a wide, well-cultivated valley ran back from Mora.

"The volcano is called La Caldera," explained Lieutenant Imray, who stood with John by the rail. "There are three other ridges like

these two, but they run to the south. In fact the thing's like an octopus squatting up there with its tentacles reaching over the island. They call the valleys in between *barrancos*. But this is the only one that's really cultivated. . . .

"That's the church. The tower with a sort of onion on top of it, behind those palms at the back of the houses. And that's Fort Sebastian on the headland to the right of the town." Built of blackish stone the fort looked neat and tidy like some toy fortress.

Turning away from the rail to go to Burrows, John saw Hadid Chebir, his wife and Mawzi. They were under the awning, watching Mora. They stood very still, like people waiting on the lip of the future, facing it with hostility.

But whatever front they put on, he thought, the strain was there. In his opinion Marion Chebir was still showing it more than the others. Then, almost like an answer to his thoughts (but coming from the least expected of the three) he saw the tall central figure of Hadid Chebir slowly sway forward and collapse to the deck. John was there before the other two seemed to have realized what had happened. Momentarily, as he knelt by Hadid, he saw Marion Chebir's face. She was staring down and there was a little furrow of creases above her eyes. Hadid was lying on his side, one cheek against the deck. His eyes were shut and he was moaning a little. John rolled him over and began to loosen his collar as Imray came up.

"Get some brandy," John said.

"No. It's not necessary."

It was Colonel Mawzi. He pushed John aside and slid his arm under Hadid's head, raising it a little. "It is the heat, Major. Sometimes this happens, always with the heat and strain. . . ."

As he spoke he raised his right hand and with the flat of the palm slapped Hadid's face. It was no gentle slap, but a hard, violent blow. Hadid stopped moaning, lay still for a few seconds and then very slowly opened his eyes. He looked at John, his eyes blank, and then his head shifted until he saw Colonel Mawzi's face hanging above him. He took a deep breath, shut his eyes for a moment and then opened them. There was no blankness in them now.

"Madame Chebir and I will take him below," said Colonel Mawzi.

They helped him to his feet and he stood, swaying a little. Then he turned slowly, making a little gesture for his wife and Mawzi not to touch him, and walked away. The two went with him.

The thing that stuck most in John's mind was Colonel Mawzi. He had spared nothing when he had slapped Hadid's face, putting all he knew into it, his lips drawn tight back from his teeth. He'd hit him as though he hated him and welcomed the chance safely to show his hatred

JOHN WENT ashore as soon as possible. He wanted to have a look round Fort Sebastian and settle where the quarters of Hadid Chebir and his party should be before he brought them ashore.

A sergeant stood waiting alongside a jeep at the end of the little wooden jetty. Behind him a little crowd of the people of Mora stood under the palm trees and watched the landing with interest.

The sergeant came to attention and saluted smartly.

"Sergeant Benson, sir."

John returned the salute and said, "Glad to meet you, Sergeant."

He was a fresh-complexioned man of about thirty-five, stocky, his drill trousers carrying a knife-edge crease, the sergeant's stripes on his shirt sleeve whitened until they almost hurt the eyes under the strong sun. He looked good-natured and competent, and not likely to stand much nonsense. They got into the jeep and began the short, rough climb to the fortress. "How do you get on with the islanders?" John asked Sergeant Benson.

"They're all right, sir. Friendly, bit childish, and some of them very light-fingered if you leave anything about. Aldobran, the manager of the Wine Co-operative, is the head man." He spoke carefully, beginning the careful process of assessing an officer. This one looked all right, but that was nothing to go by; some of the worst looked all right.

"I want to have a quick look round, so you can explain the layout as we go. You know what all this is about?"

"Yes, sir. We had a signal from Port Carlos. There's a direct telephone line between the islands."

"How many men have you got here?"

"A dozen, sir. Including myself. . . ." He hesitated. "You'll see them, sir. We don't get the cream of the Army here. . ." He flushed, and tried to save himself by adding, "That is, sir, not as far as the men are concerned."

John laughed. "It goes for officers, too, sometimes. I'll have a word with them when I've finished looking round."

They topped a slight rise and Benson said, "That's it, sir." The road ran down to a wide, dusty plateau, hedged on the seaward side by tall spikes of cactus and agave. Beyond the cactus was a steep, hundred-foot drop to the sea. Fort Sebastian sat on the end of the headland with the taller of its two round towers overlooking the water. A long stretch of crenellated wall faced them, and in its centre was a tall, arched entrance with its double wooden doors drawn back. A sentry with a fixed bayonet came to attention as they drove through into a narrow, rectangular courtyard.

For the next half-hour John was busy going over the place. The fort, which had accommodation for about three hundred men, had been built round the inner courtyard. At the seaward end was the main Flag Tower and, at the other end but on the opposite corner, was a smaller, fatter tower, called the Bell Tower from an old-fashioned warning bell mounted on its courtyard face. The Bell Tower looked out over a narrow strip of ground to the sheer face of the long ridge that ran down from La Caldera. A wide, parapetted walk ran right round the top of the four walls. Built into these walls were barrack-rooms, store-rooms, an armoury, various offices and kitchens. The officers' quarters and a fine panelled mess-room were in a long corridor above the main gate which had its own flight of steps to the parapet.

The Bell Tower, John decided, was the place for Hadid Chebir's party. It had three large rooms which would serve as bedrooms, a bigger room above for a mess-room. The only entrance to the tower was from the parapet level, reached by a stone stairway to the courtyard.

John gave instructions for the rooms to be fitted out as comfortably as possible and then told Sergeant Benson to call his men on parade.

Briefly, and as simply as he could, he explained to them the Hadid

Chebir business, and he finished, "These people are not prisoners in the strict sense of the word. They'll be under constant guard, but they will be allowed a certain amount of liberty of movement and they are to be treated with courtesy at all times. On the other hand you must not talk to them outside the line of duty. Keep your mouths shut and your eyes and ears open. Hadid Chebir and Colonel Mawzi are clever men and they don't want to stay here. So, if you see or hear anything which strikes you as out of the ordinary—not only here, but anywhere on the island—you must report it at once to Sergeant Benson."

John was worried about the guard position. With twelve men it stretched things much too tight. So far as he could see he needed at least another six men; and even then it would be less than comfortable. Going to the quarters he had chosen for himself near the large mess-room, he wrote a report to Sir George Cator, asking that a request be made to the War Office for reinforcements.

THE THREE prisoners came ashore before it was dark and were driven up to the fort.

With Sergeant Benson, John went to Madame Chebir's room after her cases had been carried in. She was standing at the barred window looking out at the steep cliff face a hundred yards away. She turned and looked at him and then round the room. Against one wall was an ornate, old-fashioned brass bed. A bedside table, a cane arm-chair, and a stout green barrack-room cupboard made up the rest of the furniture.

"I'm afraid it's pretty rough at the moment," John said. "You'll need a dressing-table and, of course, a mirror."

"Thank you. Also"—she nodded towards the cupboard—"some hooks to hang my clothes on."

"About your cases . . ." John hesitated. He hated having to do this, but it was necessary. "I'm afraid we shall have to search them."

Her mouth tightened and she made a quick little movement away from the window and then, as though the futility of any protest was clear to her, the movement became an indifferent shrug.

She crossed to the bed and picked up her handbag. She fished in it and said, "You'll want the keys." But instead of handing them to John

she tossed them on to the bed and then turned back to the window.

They went through the clothes carefully. She had a very comprehensive selection of clothes. Good ones, too, John noticed; Balmain, Dior, and shoes from Ferragamo in Florence. His hand fell on a couple of black notebooks. He flipped one open. "What are these?" he asked.

She turned. "My diaries."

He dropped them back in the case and shut it. She was staring at him hostilely. Damn it, she must see that he had a job to do. He went to the bed and picked up her handbag. A little ruthlessly, piqued by her attitude, he tipped the contents on to the bed. A purse, a compact, some keys, a silk handkerchief, a small bottle of aspirin, sun-glasses . . . he gathered them up and put them back in the bag. On the bed also was her jewel-case. He went through it and then closed the lid with a snap and stepped back.

"All right, Sergeant," he said. "That's the lot." And then, as Sergeant Benson moved towards the door, he said to her, "I apologize for this, but unfortunately——"

She gave an angry jerk of her head, rejecting his apology, and said quickly, "I wonder you don't finish the job and search me. I might have a file sewn into my waistband."

John let his mouth twist into a smile and hoped that it would irritate her. All right, so she had spirit.

"The bars," he said, "are over two inches thick. They'll take you a long time to saw through and they'll be inspected morning and evening. There's also a hundred-foot drop and the combined length of your bed-clothes is about twenty-five feet when knotted, say fifty if you tear them into double strips. . . . You'd still have a long way to drop. I'd be very concerned if you were to break your neck."

Looking straight into his eyes she said with a lack of emphasis that somehow gave the words more force than anger could have done, "As far as I'm concerned, Major Richmond, you can go to hell."

He said calmly, "In the circumstances I can see that it's a reasonable attitude."

"Also," she halted John as he was half out of the room, "I'd like a key for the door. I notice there is none."

"The keys from all rooms have been withdrawn on my instructions," John said briefly and went out.

Sergeant Benson closed her door and for a moment he and John looked at one another. "She's quite a woman, isn't she, sir?" said Benson. "I thought we might get something thrown at us."

Together they went through the rooms of Hadid Chebir and Colonel Mawzi, and finished up with Abou the servant, who had a small, windowless room on the parapet level quite close to the Bell Tower's door which could be locked and bolted from the outside and was always to be guarded.

Colonel Mawzi made no objection to the search. He sat on the bed smoking as his cases were searched. Then he stood up silently and raised his hands above his head. John ran his hands over him and made him turn out his pockets. With Hadid Chebir it was much the same, except that he was lying on his bed and John had to ask him to stand up to be searched. He did so, taking his time, ignoring them, his thoughts apparently miles away. When they had finished John turned to Benson and said, "Sergeant, wait outside for me a moment."

With the sergeant gone, John turned back to Hadid Chebir. For a moment the long, intelligent, handsome face was uncompromising. Then very slowly the fleshy lips flexed as though they were trying to remember how to smile and he said, "It was a long time ago, wasn't it, Richmond?"

"A long time, yes."

"So long that I prefer to imagine it never was. This is the only time I shall refer to it."

"As you wish. I just want to have one thing clear. I regard you as responsible for the behaviour of your party. I want you to be as comfortable as you can. But if there's any trouble I shall clamp down hard."

"I think you've made yourself clear."

"Good."

COLONEL MAWZI had one inner window-frame drawn back and was leaning with his elbows on the stone sill, looking out through the thick bars at the night. So far everything had gone just as he had

imagined it would. It was too soon yet for anything to happen. It would be some days before there would be any sign. In the meantime patience was easy.

Of the three or four places the British had to choose from they had picked Mora. That had been his guess, too. . . . The only real danger had been the chance that they might be held in Cyrenia and made to stand a trial. Hadid had worried about this, but not he. . . . The British would not want to stir up so much publicity and propaganda. Hadid was a fool as well as a puppet. He had intelligence and he had courage of a kind, but he was a fool not to have seen the unspoken, ultimate step that lay beyond all their plans. To be sent into exile, to escape and return with all the driving ferocity that their homecoming would bring . . . to sweep back into Cyrenia and enflame the waverers who until now had held them back. . . . Yes, Hadid understood all that, but the one thing he couldn't possibly see was the last step. Cyrenia needed another martyr, and Hadid was going to provide it. Colonel Mawzi would return alone to tell the story, to raise every village and *souk* into revolt and to take over.

He stared at the night, confident, a small, wiry composed man who knew exactly where he was going. There was a knock on the door behind him. He called "Come in" and turned as Marion Chebir entered.

She wore a simple green frock. He noticed that her face was made up a little more than usual with a different lipstick. She was always particular about her appearance; the more difficult the crisis, the more attractive she had made herself—for Hadid. But that was past. The habit remained. Mawzi had a great admiration for her. This was a woman who knew how to love a man and a cause . . . a woman who needed love. All she had now was a fervent love of Cyrenia, but even that fire was dying in her.

A woman would take a husband's cause to her heart, be more ruthless than he in fostering it—but when love died . . . then she became a woman again.

She came over to the window.

"The major searched your cases?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Mine, too."

She held out her hand and gave him a long flat parcel.

"I brought it from Tunis as you said. Hadid had the jewel-case made for me years ago. The major would have been very clever to find it. I am worried about Hadid."

"There is no need to be."

"On the destroyer today——"

"Just sometimes the strain hits him. You have seen him faint before. As for this"—he tapped the parcel—"he has used it all his life. But he can do without it. His greatest need for it is before he has to take action."

"When will that be?"

Colonel Mawzi shrugged his shoulders. "It is arranged, but one cannot always name the day. All that is asked now is patience—and you will see our victory in Cyrenia." Colonel Mawzi smiled. "There are ways of making oneself comfortable. Hadid needs nothing, except this occasionally," he held up the parcel, "but you and I We are made of blood and spirit as well as hopes."

"We have had this discussion before."

Colonel Mawzi dropped the parcel on to the table and moved towards her.

"We have. But in different circumstances. Now we are shut up together. For you Hadid is a shadow. But I am here. See."

He stepped close to her and put his arms about her and his lips touched the side of her neck. She put up a hand and pushed him away. He moved back easily, and the dark eyes in the wedge-shaped face watched her curiously.

"I don't need you," she said calmly. "The only thing that keeps me here is my loyalty to Hadid. You know that."

"I do not forget it." He half-turned away. "But the need is here, in me and in you, and some time it will have to be acknowledged. A woman cannot love a shadow for ever. I am content to wait."

She went out, leaving him by the window, not even watching her going and she knew it was his form of arrogance.

Going down the stairs to her room she had a longing, a great tenderness—for ordinary things . . . to lie in bed in some English town, to hear

the whistle of a passing express train as she had when a girl in Swindon . . . a hot stuffy English night with a day coming full of ordinary things.

SERGEANT BENSON had a small room next to the armoury, opposite the main gate. On the wall was a photograph of a rather plain-looking young woman sitting on a pebble beach holding a sunshade, and written across the bottom of it—"Hilda, Brighton, 1952." One day Sergeant Benson would go back to England and marry Hilda. She was neat and comfortable like himself.

Hilda was certainly no oil painting, Corporal March was thinking as he sat talking to Benson. The serg. didn't have to worry about her while he was away, as he had to worry about his girl in London. She was a cinema usherette and if he thought too much about her and what she might be up to it made him very short-tempered.

He said, "What's the major going to be like, Serg?"

Sergeant Benson jabbed a couple of holes in the top of a can of beer and filled their glasses. "I don't know," he said thoughtfully.

"Not easy?" Corporal March tipped his chair back.

"Not easy in the way you want," said the sergeant. He drank his beer and said forcefully, "So far as you're concerned, my lad—and the others—there's no more sleeping out of barracks. No slipping off to Ardino for you while we've got this job on." He didn't really like March. He was a thin dark-haired fellow, a bit unhealthy-looking like so many of those Londoners, and a bit flashy in his manner. But not a bad chap right down.

"Trust an officer to muck everything up."


"It's not him. You try and figure out a twenty-four-hour guard rota with the handful we've got. Your girl friend over at Ardino is just going to be lonely. Anyway, they're a bad lot over there."

Corporal March stood up and went to the door. "They're no worse than any of the others Arianna's a smasher." He said it a little pugnaciously as though he wanted to convince himself.

"You'd be wise to keep away from that dog-faced brother of hers, Torlo. He doesn't know how to talk unless he's got a knife in his hand."

Corporal March made an angry noise to cover his sudden sense of anxiety. The sergeant didn't mean anything by it, but he was very near the truth.

CHAPTER FOUR

 M.S. DUNOON stayed three days at Mora. During that time the garrison at Fort Sebastian settled into an orderly routine. At night the three prisoners and Abou were locked in the Bell Tower, but during the day the three were free to move along the stretch of parapet between the Bell Tower and the Flag Tower. There was a sentry on duty outside the Bell Tower door to the parapet at all times.

None of the prisoners, except Abou, was allowed down into the courtyard or into any other part of the fort. Abou was allowed to move freely between the Bell Tower and the kitchen quarters to fetch and carry meals for the other three. It was curious that while most of the men showed little continuing interest in the three prisoners, they all took to Abou. Within twenty-four hours they had given him that teasing, fondly bullying affection which troops bestow on those who excite their imagination or touch their sympathy. Abou, padding about bare-footed, smiling when spoken to but not, they were all sure, understanding a word, drawing his thin shoulders in and making a slight, old man's bow when any kindness was done him, became their pet. In the kitchen he was instructed in the rudiments of English, beginning as troops always do with those simple, barrack-room obscenities which in the uncomprehending mouths of foreigners always convulse the British soldiers.

Unknown to them Abou enjoyed it too; for he had a very competent understanding of the English language which he kept to himself. Abou fetched and carried, but not only food. The name and duties of each man were noted, the layout of the men's quarters and the details of the duty rosters

The cook, Jenkins, took Abou under his wing. Within two days it had become a ritual that when Abou brought back the dishes from the

evening meal to the kitchen the two would adjourn to the courtyard and sit in the last angle of sunlight and talk. Jenkins, as a change from cooking, had taken on the duties of gardener. In the centre of the courtyard was a large, stone-edged circle, in which grew azaleas, oleanders and syringa.

All these Jenkins tended, watered, hoed between and cherished. If any man from the garrison walked unheedingly across the circle, or tossed an empty cigarette packet on to the tidiness, Jenkins would bellow from the cook-house door.

In the dead centre of the patch was Jenkins's joy, and indeed Mora's pride. This was a tree.

Its trunk, which was a good fifteen feet in circumference at the base, was a distinctive light grey colour, rough and grained like old elephant hide. At about six feet from the ground the trunk divided into a mass of upthrusting smooth grey branches, leafless until their very extremities, a good forty feet from the ground, where they were tipped with narrow, spear-like leaves, two or three feet long. The thing looked like a great candelabra, the maze of grey branches twisted and involved, reaching up and spreading out into a gigantic mushroom shape.

Jenkins was fascinated by it. From the family of his girl friend in Mora he had learned its history, and he had also written to the secretary of the Royal Horticultural Society in England for botanical details. Sitting with Abou now, peeling potatoes for the next day's meals, Abou helping him, Jenkins was happy to give him a lecture about it, not caring whether Abou understood or not.

"You see, Abby, it ain't a true tree, not really. It's really a lily—that's what the botanical boys say. Round here it's called the dragon tree. And it don't have sap. It has blood. Like a human being. You cut it with a knife and it bleeds."

Abou smiled politely and his eyes were on Jenkins. The cook shook his head despairingly.

"The tree I'm talking about. It has blood, real blood, and it's about a thousand years old. Know what they say round here? When the original islanders made their last stand against the Spanish, they fought it out under this tree, and as they went down the tree began to weep

blood." He pinched Abou's arm and then drew a finger across his own throat. "Blood. Buckets of it. Every once in a hundred or so years it begins to weep blood and when it does it means trouble."

JOHN WENT aboard the *Dunoon* before she left Mora at noon of the third day and gave Burrows his report. After she had sailed, he went round to see *Señor* Andrea Aldobran and asked him to get his people to keep their eyes open for strangers. Then he returned to the Fort.

Marion Chebir, who was leaning over the inner wall of the parapet, saw him pause beside Jenkins, who was watering the shrubs in the courtyard. They spoke for a moment but she couldn't hear what they said. But abruptly she heard John laugh, and his tanned face was suddenly open and boyish. The sound of the laugh gave her an unexpected pang. Just to raise your head like that and laugh, free, without a shadow. It was a long time since it had happened to her.

He crossed the yard and came up the steps by the Bell Tower to the parapet. Every morning and afternoon he came up to have a word with the sentry, and to offer himself to his charges if they should want something. He was correct, she thought, but the moment he began to climb the steps to face them he left part of himself behind down there.

He saluted her as he came on to the parapet and she turned towards him. Her hands had been resting on the stones and she made a little movement to dust some scraps of lichen from her palms.

"The *Dunoon's* gone, so you're all alone. Master of Mora." She said it with a light note. "I watched her go out round the headland," she went on. "There's always something sad in watching a ship leave. Not, of course, that I've any special affection for the *Dunoon*."

"I don't think I should have either, if I were you," John answered.

She laughed. "Can you imagine yourself in these circumstances? A prisoner?"

"I shall try to make it as comfort-

She raised a hand swiftly and cut him off. "No, no . . . don't start being a warder for the moment. Down there you could laugh and be natural. You might spare a little for these regions. Ah, now you look surprised."

She couldn't have told herself why this mood had suddenly come over her . . . but she felt unexpectedly the need to pretend the situation was different.

"I am," he said frankly. "I thought you only saw me as a warder."

She nodded, remembering her arrival at Fort Sebastian. "Yes, I was rude. I apologize once more." She smiled, dismissing the past. "What was it that the cook said which made you laugh?"

John grinned. "If I told you, you would be shocked."

She shook her head lightly. "I doubt it. I worked as a shop-girl for years before my marriage." She paused, silent for a while, as though the word "marriage" were taking her back over the years. In the bright, hard sunlight she gave the impression of being taller than she actually was, partly from the way she held herself, the fine shoulders carried proudly, and from the long line of her body which had a firm, controlled grace. The kind of woman, John told himself, who would look right anywhere . . . on a dance floor, or mucking about in a boat; but not mixed up in all this Cyrenian business. She'd come into that through Hadid Chebir, though there seemed to be nothing of man and wife between them now . . . he couldn't see her as having a distinct passion for Cyrenia by itself.

All the fatigue and anger seemed to have gone from her, she looked young, fresh and, he didn't even try to ward off the thought, the kind of attractive creature a man would find running easily through his first, second and a great many succeeding thoughts.

"Tell me," she said suddenly, "did you know Hadid well at Oxford?"

"Not very. We played rugby together sometimes. And once we spent a week-end walking in Wales. We were in two parties. I didn't see much of him."

"You find him changed? But, of course you do."

"Well, it was a long time ago. He's been through a lot since then."

Marion nodded. "Hadid in those days was like . . . like quicksilver. All movement and fun and just a bit crazy. Now he has become Cyrenia." She made a sudden characteristic gesture with her right hand which he realized indicated the brushing away of a thought. "He was popular at Oxford?"

"Yes. He was liked very much."

She moved forward from the wall abruptly. "I saw him change. I didn't understand much about it in those days. But I learned." Firmness was back in her voice and the easy friendly creature of a moment before was gone. "It was terrible. He used to love the British. And then he hated them. For a time he tried to both love and hate them. But it wouldn't work. So he chose. And I chose with him because I was his wife and loved him. . . ." She stopped and looked fully at John. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't talk about these things. It embarrasses you. . . ."

Before he could say or do anything she walked away, shutting him off completely from any connection with her, and went past the sentry through the doorway of the Bell Tower.

ALTHOUGH the *Dunoon* headed north from Mora for San Borodon and Port Carlos she did not continue long on this course. Four miles out she altered course to port and began to make a wide sweep right round Mora, but well out of sight of it. By the time she was three-quarters of the way round her circuit of the island the evening was closing in and long before she was back on her course for Port Carlos it was dark. Her radar and look-outs had picked up no sign of shipping whatsoever.

On the poop deck sat Petty Officer Grogan and Sick Berth Attendant Andrews. Between the stolid Petty Officer and the freckle-faced young man with the pugnacious mouth there had grown a quiet friendship, unspoken and undemonstrative, except on shore leave when they drank together to excess.

Andrews said, "Why'd we have to go all round the houses like this?"

"We'll be going all round the houses for a long time. Just so long as that mob are on Mora. Nobody's going to slip in and whip them away."

"Rule Britannia." Andrews's mouth twisted into a grin. "Send a boy to do a man's job. I was talking to Sergeant Benson before we left. He's got a dozen men. A dozen!"

He opened a packet of cigarettes and Grogan reached out and took one, lit it and leaned back. There should be mail waiting for them back in Port Carlos. There'd be a couple of letters from his wife. Wonder

what she'd been up to this time? Always up to something. Redecorating the kitchen, reorganizing the front garden, digging up the plants to see if they'd got roots . . . he saw her affectionately in his mind's eye. A firm, well-set-up woman with a smile nothing could shake. Suddenly he felt very close to her. So far as he was concerned she could take the roof off the house and put it back upside down if it pleased her.

At his side Andrews stared up at the sky and listened to the sound of a plane high above the light pocking of small clouds. Just for a moment he caught a glimpse of navigation lights high, high up . . .

Petty Officer Grogan said, "That's the Iberia plane. Madrid, Lisbon, Bermuda, Havana . . . She's late, too. But did you ever know a Spaniard that wasn't?"

BUT IT WASN'T the Iberia plane for Havana. That had passed over an hour before and dead on time. This was a flying-boat working under Spanish charter for a company whose real nationality it would have been difficult to unravel with any truth.

She had left Aargub on the coast of Spanish Sahara five hours before. Aargub was the kind of place where open curiosity was a dangerous form of bad manners. The six men in the plane, too, never ignored curiosity. They dealt with it unemotionally.

Apart from the pilot they were all members of the Cyrenian National Army. The leader of the party was Walter Mietus, a German with a Greek mother. His loyalty to any organization was governed by the money it paid him and the work it expected him to do. More than once he had turned down good money because the work struck him as routine. He needed excitement. His first sight of the Mediterranean had been as a young Oberleutnant in the Afrika Korps; twenty-three years old, married to a girl in Dusseldorf and with two young boys. At El Alamein his tank had been hit by an armour-piercing 3.7 inch shell from a British anti-aircraft gun. His crew were killed but he climbed out of the turret and jumped clear, but not clear enough. The tank, canted on a slope, rolled over to one side, trapping him by the legs and across his lower stomach. He should have been crushed to death but the soft sand giving a couple of inches under his body and the tank

settling back a fraction of an inch saved him. While in hospital in Italy he learned that his wife and boys had been killed in a bombing raid on Dusseldorf. He wept—for the last time in his life.

Now he walked with bowed, awkward legs and his body was hard and shock-proof with the strength of a deformed oak. At forty, his fair hair was white and thinning and scurfy, and his squarish, not unpleasant face, had the rough, sand-and-water bleached colour of a pine plank that has lain on a beach for months.

The others were all close to Mietus's age; Lorentzen who had been thrown from some limbo into the French Foreign Legion, deserted, drifted half-way round the world and then back again; Plevsky, out of Russian captivity to the Polish Army of General Anders, to become a deserter in Cairo, and finally a guerilla in Cyrenia; and Roper who spoke English with a gentle voice and what could have been the authentic echo of an Irish accent, who loved reading and music and practised an absorbing dedication to violence; and last of all Sifal, dark-skinned, the only true Cyrenian among them, and here because he was Colonel Mawzi's choice as a first-class radio operator.

After his capture Colonel Mawzi had found means for Mietus to come secretly to his cell, and had briefed him. Each man had been chosen for some particular need, and all of them for the common reason that not for years had any of them known a moment's hesitation in killing. Plevsky, alone, still had a few moments of regret for the past, still could find a little compassion for others though he was careful never to let his companions suspect it.

For an hour after passing over H.M.S. *Dunoon* the plane stayed on her westerly route. Then the pilot, Max Dondon, brought her round slowly in a circle and headed eastward losing height gently. Three-quarters of an hour later he picked up the distant gleam of the San Borodon light. Slowly ahead of them the dark loom of Mora began to swell from the sea.

"Lights," said Roper.

Max threw a switch and all the lights in the flying-boat, except the dim cockpit glow, went out. They went south another couple of miles. The flying-boat dropped to the waters like a great bird. Gently they

taxied in. Roper touched Max on the shoulder and the engines died. They lay there rocking slowly on the long swell.

Each man then moved with the sureness of long drilling. The hull doors were opened and the fresh sea air swept into the tobacco-fogged interior. An inflated rubber dinghy bloomed suddenly alongside and lay tugging at its painter. Mietus slid down into it and reached up for the packs that were lowered. When it was full Sifal joined him. Another dinghy was dropped to the water and swelled slowly to its full size. This, too, was loaded and then crewed by Roper, Lorentzen and Plevsky.

Their only good-bye to Max was Plevsky's raised right hand. They paddled away into the night as the doors of the fuselage closed. The engines of the flying-boat coughed and turned and across the waters a furrow of white bow wake was scored like a long rent in the fabric of the darkness.

The men came ashore on a small beach at the foot of a rough black pinnacle of cliff. The dinghies were deflated and folded; and then, each man burdened with a heavy pack, they moved away from the sea. It still needed two hours before midnight and the rising of the moon, and by that time they would be high up on the slopes of La Caldera.

THE GARDEN of Government House on San Borodon ended on the seaward side in a small promontory topped with a little stucco-and-tile gazebo. It was a wild part of the garden, deliberately left to itself by Sir George because he disliked too much formality in gardens. Azaleas, oleanders and a stiff frieze of prickly pear cactus backed the little building in a rough semicircle, and before it was a wide terrace of flat, rough stones from whose cracks grew a collection of heathers and herbs, each planted by Sir George who had little chance on San Borodon to indulge his love of Nature.

Teddy Burrows and his wife, Daphne, were sitting on the terrace just outside the gazebo. Teddy, comfortable from two glasses of the Governor's port, one of his cigars now in his hands, sprawled a little, the stiff front of his mess shirt bulging gently, and felt at ease. He had worried on the way up from Mora, thinking that Daphne would expect

him to sleep at Government House and disliking to pull his rank to do so. But Daphne, for a change, was being very reasonable about his sleeping aboard. Tonight the edge of discord between them seemed to be gone. It might be, he thought, the beginning of a proper understanding in her. . . . After all it took a few years for married people to settle down and understand one another.

He put out a large paw and took her hand.

"It's a nuisance. There's nothing I'd like better than to be up here with you all the time, but you know that wouldn't go down well on the *Dunoon*. I don't like it any more than you."

Actually, Daphne was thinking to herself, the poor dear's got it all wrong. Since she had made her decision to leave him this business of sleeping ashore had become unimportant. Earlier, when she had first come to Port Carlos, she had been annoyed because he wouldn't. But that annoyance sprang from her own pride. She was his wife, she was attractive; he should want to take every opportunity to be with her. Now that she knew she was going to leave him there was a new tenderness in her. He would do better without her, would find himself someone more suited to him.

She stood up and the stiff under-petticoat of her dress swung the skirt out in a wide flare that brushed against his knees. The movement stirred the air and it was touched with the fragrance of her scent. Teddy held her hand as she stood above him, tall, slim, her hair like a wan flame.

He stood up and kissed her. Just for a moment his bulk, the strength in his arms and the rough, cigar odour and his masculinity moved her. She kissed him warmly, her affection for him taking her much nearer passion than she had known with him. Maybe, she thought, every good-bye kiss, the real good-bye, held that promise, the promise that could never be fulfilled.

IN HIS little office Neil Grayson had done two hours work on the Hadid Chebir report for Whitehall after Sir George had gone to bed. Now he poured himself a whisky and soda and went out to the veranda, put his feet up on a cane chair and relaxed.

After a while Daphne Burrows came round the far end of the veranda and stood under one of the shaded lights, looking down towards Port Carlos. He watched her, knowing she hadn't seen him. Momentarily he contrasted her with Marion Chebir. They were both beautiful, striking women. But Daphne's elegance was brittle, delicate. A high wind on a cliff-top would have cut her down, but the Chebir woman would have leaned into it, taken the wind in her face and breasts and laughed at it. . . . Anyway, Daphne was much more his



type. . . . Because she was Sir George's daughter and Teddy Burrows's wife she had no place in his world, but she was the kind of woman he normally felt drawn to.

She turned, sensing perhaps his thoughts, and came down the veranda towards him.

He stood up as she dropped into a chair. She looked at his glass and then at him.

"A whisky and soda is what I want too, Neil," she said.

He brought her the drink, and they sat in silence for a while.

Then very calmly she said, "Teddy's gone back to the *Dunoon*." She

twisted the glass in her hand. "It would be easy," she said, "if a whisky and soda were the answer to everything."

He knew then that she wanted to talk to him.

When he made no reply she laughed quietly.

"I know, that's a silly remark. But it isn't always possible to go straight to the point."

"Are you sure that you really want to go there?"

She nodded. "I don't want to be let out . . . it's too late. I've finally made up my mind. I'm going to leave Teddy."

He was silent for a moment, his mind working fast. She'd never made any confidence to him before. They called one another "Neil" and "Daphne" but that was the limit of their informal contact. But he knew that she was clear-sighted, determined and not without ruthlessness. It was easy to recognize in others the things you possessed yourself. So that now he knew that everything was calculated and deliberate in this confidence and he was trying to see beyond this moment.

"Divorce?"

"Yes. In a few weeks I shall go back to England."

"Does Sir George know about this?"

"Not yet. Nobody knows, except me—and now you."

He didn't miss that either, but it was less of a surprise to him.

"Not even Teddy, yet," she added.

"Sir George won't take to it kindly."

"He will after a while. I can manage him."

"I don't doubt it."

He smiled and she answered it with her own smile and this movement of expressions between them was the first of their own intimacies.

"You can manage most things, I imagine."

"Most. But not all. There are some things a woman can't be by herself. You know what I mean?"

He nodded. "Clearly."

He leaned back in his chair and fingered his glass, looking at her. The attractiveness of her body and her personality he acknowledged to himself by the distant tremor of excitement within him, but just now it had little importance.

"How clearly? I don't altogether trust you, Neil. Just cocking an eyebrow, smiling and keeping silent isn't understanding."

"All right. You want words. But you should see that I understand because of what I haven't said. I haven't asked you why you are going to break with Teddy."

"But you know."

"I think so. You're like me. You laid down an ambitious plan for yourself. When you married Teddy he seemed to fit into it, seemed to be the man who would make it possible. But when he stuck to the Navy the whole thing flopped. He'll never be an Admiral. Now, you've decided to make a fresh start. Good for you."

Very quietly she said, "It could be good for both of us. And it could be everything you want."

Neil laughed pleasantly. There was no surprise in him.

"I've no doubt that some parts would be wonderful. But, quite frankly, if you've got a plan for yourself, so have I. It includes a wife, but she must be much more than just that." He pulled out his cigarette case and held it towards her. She'd been outspoken, dropped every inch of pride to speak so frankly, but he knew that as far as he was concerned he still walked a tight-rope. The wrong word or phrase could destroy everything. "Tell me," he said, "what it is that you're offering which I can't find elsewhere? Other women have money and connections too."

"I can get you a directorship in Talloid Chemicals." She smiled to herself as for the first time she saw his face grow serious. "The chairman isn't unknown at the Central Conservative Office. You could have a constituency, maybe a safe one right from the start. In ten years you could be in the Cabinet. It's bad luck, maybe, to put a name to the ultimate thing you want. But if you want it, so will I and . . ." she stood up, ". . . and I think you know now that when I want a thing I don't stand about dreaming and hoping for it to turn up." She moved a little towards the door and then looked back at him. "But everything has to be right," she said.

"You know it will be. You wouldn't have spoken to me if you didn't think so."

CHAPTER FIVE

HALF A MILE inland where the *barranco* began to rise steeply the road from Mora split into a fork. Corporal March brought the jeep to a halt.

"Which way, sir?"

In the angle of the road was a rough finger-post. The left-hand sign read *Torba*, and the other *Ardino*. John Richmond spread a map on his knees and studied it.

For the first time in three days since the *Dunoon* had left, he had felt that he could take some time off and have a closer look at the island. It never hurt to have the feel of the land.

Apart from Mora, Ardino and Torba were the only settlements on the island. Neither of them amounted to much, and at both of them, he saw, the road came to an end, leaving the whole southern sweep of the island inaccessible except on foot and along the goat tracks.

Corporal March stared ahead at the rising cone of La Caldera and hoped that Major Richmond would choose the Ardino road. If they went there, he might get a chance of a few words with Arianna. Not once since H.M.S. *Dunoon* had brought her prisoners to Mora had he had a chance to slip out and see his girl.

"Let's have a look at Ardino."

Corporal March put the jeep in gear and they began to climb steeply up the side of the valley. The road twisted and curved round small gorges and gradually the wide Mora *barranco* was spread out below them, terraced and patterned with strips of green. Now and again they passed some small cabin with its neat square of garden quarried and terraced out of the rough hillside.

From the top of the ridge they could look down the western slope of La Caldera to Ardino. The country was wild and broken, tumbling away to the cliff edge and the blue-green Atlantic waters. The steep road down ended about two hundred yards from the sea in a wide circle of bare, hard-packed earth. A few houses crouched squalidly

round the circle and over one of them in faded blue letters ran the words *Bar Filis*. The two men got out of the jeep and Corporal March seeing Richmond look round, puzzled, said, "There won't be anyone much about, sir. They'll all be working. Most of the men down on the beach and the women up there with the vines." He jerked his head towards the hillside.

John looked round, at the shabby church and the single story houses, paint and plaster flaking from them. The whole place looked sullen and unkempt. A dog came up and walked suspiciously round him. He told March to get some wine for their rations, and then moved away past the church and took the path to the beach. March turned and went over to the *Bar Filis*.

It was dark inside after the hard light of the day. An unshaven man in shirt sleeves was leaning with his elbows on the bar, picking his teeth and reading an old magazine. Four young men, smoking long brown cigarillos, were playing cards at a table by the wall. The card players looked up briefly and nodded to him. He was Arianna's soldier. They accepted him but no more.

The barman said, "Is that the new officer?"

March nodded.

"He is good to thee?"

Although he spoke a rough Spanish that had improved since he had known Arianna, March said in English, "He's an officer." His tone made the barman laugh.

"And the others? I hear there is a woman."

"Don't talk to me about them. A man could get out for a breath of fresh air before they came."

"Fresh air. Ah, yes." The barman scratched his stubble with dirt-rimmed nails.

"A bottle of white and a bottle of red. The good stuff."

The barman brought the bottles and as March handed him some money he said, "Where's Arianna?"

One of the card players said, without turning or looking at March, "It is her day for the church. Maybe there."

March took his bottles back to the jeep, and then walked over to

the church. He went in by the side entrance, into the little room which the priest who came from Mora used once a week. An old cassock hung behind the door and flower stalk ends lay on the rough wooden table where they had been cut. He pushed open the inner door to the church. A blue and white wooden Madonna with a tinsel crown backed the altar and great banks of flowers were arranged on either side of the steps. There was a smell of old incense. Crude wall paintings of shipwrecks, each with a saint treading air above it, ran down the far wall.

Arianna was with another girl by the altar. She turned as the door creaked, her arms full of Madonna lilies, and just looking at her March felt his throat choke. She was a little over twenty, a rough apron covered her faded frock and a handkerchief was tied across her dark hair. She had a young face, both childish and sensuous. Seeing him, she put the flowers down, and came across to him quickly. He took her arm, pulled her into the little room and closed the door.

She came into his arms and they kissed. It was a long kiss and



left them both shaking. She said, "Why hast thou been so long?"

"We have a new officer. He keeps us working hard."

"Even at night?"

"We must guard these prisoners, even at night." He paused, letting his eye travel down the length of her body. She was well-built but slender at the waist. He felt ashamed of the thought, but as far as he could see there was no change in her. "How is it with thee?"

"I do not know yet. Sometimes I fear. But now with thee the fear has gone." She came back to him, her full bosom just touching the front of his bush shirt. "The flowers are finished. We could go——"

He shook his head. "I can't go anywhere. I'm here with the officer. He's on the beach but soon he will be back."

He saw the disappointment hardening the heavy passion in her face.

"Ask this officer to let thee come back. Tonight."

"Arianna," he rolled his eyes, "things aren't like that in the Army."

"But thou wilt come?"

"Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow."

"My brother asks why we don't see thee. He says the British soldiers take what they want from a woman and then look for another."

March said gently, not wanting a scene, "Tomorrow or the next day, I will come. Now I must go to my officer."

When he got outside Major Richmond was standing by the jeep.

THEY DROVE back to the fork road and then out to Torba. The country was much the same, and Torba almost as slatternly and dead as Ardino. They ate their haversack rations on a ridge top above Torba and drank half a bottle of wine each. Afterwards March slept and Richmond set off along the ridge towards La Caldera. He knew he had no hope of reaching the top. It was a good two-hour climb from this side, and, anyway, he could see that eventually he would be faced with a tall rock face two hundred feet high. But he was in need of exercise. It was hot and he was soon sweating. He went through a pine forest and found himself, half an hour later, on a wide moraine of old lava. He wondered whether to go on to the foot of the cliffs, and then decided to return to the jeep.

Although he didn't know it, his hesitation had been marked by Walter Mietus and Roper. High up on the lip of the cliffs they had watched the jeep go to Torba, and come back and halt on the ridge, and without a word they had seen Richmond begin his climb.

Mietus focused his glasses on Richmond as he went back along the edge of the pine forest. "He wears a major's crown," he said.

"Does he walk with an object, you think?"

"Why should he? He is English. They are dedicated to exercise, to sport."

Roper took the glasses.

"He goes well. They haven't sent an arm-chair officer. What would he say, you think, if he knew he was probably due to have his throat cut some day in Fort Sebastian?"

TWO HOURS later John was back at Fort Sebastian. Sergeant Benson came into him before dinner, saluted and then said, "While you were away today, sir, I had a request from two of the prisoners. Colonel Mawzi and Madame Chebir. They want to know whether they can be allowed to bathe from the beach below the fort."

John was silent for a moment, then he said, "What do you think about it?"

"Well, sir, it's hot enough. They've only got that parapet to walk on."

"All right, Sergeant. One guard on the beach and a man standing off in a boat. But if one goes down they all go down, Abou as well, even if they don't swim. I don't want the party broken up. Haven't got enough guards."

"I can stand off in the boat myself, sir. That'll ease things a bit."

"Good. Has Corporal March got a girl at Ardino?"

Sergeant Benson's bluff face showed his surprise. John smiled. "It's all right, I'm not a thought-reader. He came out of the church over there and I saw a girl standing in the doorway behind him."

"I believe there is a girl over there, sir."

"All right, Sergeant. That's all. I'll see Colonel Mawzi myself later and tell him about the bathing party."

THE NEXT afternoon John went down the rough, zigzag track to the beach to see how things were going. The scene would have made a press photographer happy

The patch of coarse black sand lay at the foot of the cliffs on the far side of Fort Sebastian, flanked by two horns of dark cliff. The Atlantic swell came in with a regular smack and roar and then a long suck-back over the beach. Sergeant Benson, stripped to the waist, wearing one of the wide-brimmed hats the islanders made from palmetto, sat in a small rowing boat fifty yards offshore, dipping his oars now and again to keep station. A guard with a rifle came to attention as John jumped to the beach, his feet sinking into the loose sand.

Colonel Mawzi was in the water, a few yards from the boat, lying on his back and kicking a little now and then with his feet. Hadid Chebir sat on the near side of the beach, cross-legged on a rug, a book balanced on his knees. He wore linen trousers and a silk shirt open at the neck. He looked up as John's shadow fell near him and for a moment his face was relaxed, almost pleasant.

"You don't bathe?" asked John.

"No, Major. But it is pleasant to sit down here and be cool. We are grateful to you." He turned the book over to keep the pages from flying in the breeze and reached for cigarette and matches from the rug at his side. "How long," he asked, "do you think they will keep us here?"

"I do not know."

"Officially, of course not. But privately, what do you think?"

John shrugged "Unless we have a change of government, I do not think you will see Cyrenia for many years."

Hadid shook his head. "The easiest way to alter the course of a river is to go to the mountain and divert the small spring. That is what your people think I am the spring, the source But block one spring and the hillside is broken by others because water must flow."

"Sometimes," said John, "it lies about, stagnant in ponds, until the sun evaporates it—"

Hadid threw back his head and laughed, and then suddenly silent he gave John a quick look, shook his head and turned abruptly to his book.

John passed on, not understanding the man, and touched by a sense of irritation with the whole confused hotchpotch.

A voice said, "You look very serious, Major."

He stopped walking. Marion Chebir lay stretched out on a large towel. She lay there in a white costume, all woman under the sun, and one hand was raised a little to shade her eyes as she looked up at him.

"Maybe I am."

He lowered himself on the sand at her side and there was no surprise in him at his action until he was sitting there with his hands clasped round his knees, looking at her. The salt water from her recent swim was wet on her legs.

"And yet you can make Hadid laugh?"

She sat up and jerked her head backward to throw the loose dark hair from her forehead.

"Is it so hard to do that?"

Her legs were brown and long and polished and he had no interest in Hadid at all. Quite suddenly it was as though someone had warningly struck him gently across the throat with the edge of a hand making him swallow quickly.

"It is very hard. You must have said something very funny." She leaned forward and ran her hands down her legs sliding away the water from her skin and in his own hands he could feel the sensation of how it would be to hold her hands.

"I said peace could come from stagnation." But he wasn't interested in his own words.

"Maybe it is funny for Hadid. I don't know." Her hands came back and, as she raised them to smooth her hair, they hesitated at the top of her costume and she gave the edge of the white silk a little tug to settle it more comfortably. It was a gesture he had seen many women make, but seeing her do it now it was new and left his eyes watching the column of her throat. It was something he had never had before, this kind of wanting that struck without warning. He knew he ought to go away, but he sat there and watched her let the black sand trickle through her fingers. She was without any coquetry or real awareness of him.

"I don't know," she said again. She looked full at him then, and smiled a little, bringing him wanly to life in her own mind.

This man Richmond, she thought, had a difficult job. He must hate it. You could tell that. It was hard to imagine what he was really like. There must be a warm, natural John Richmond somewhere. She shut her eyes and deliberately imagined herself on some Mediterranean beach with him . . . swimming and sunbathing, laughing and somewhere behind them the sound of ice against glass. So many things seemed to have gone from her life. . . . Give me, she thought vehemently, a four-roomed villa, a loving husband with twelve pounds a week, and it would be paradise

A shadow went across the sun and Colonel Mawzi was standing before them, bitten with the sun, his waist thin and wiry above the red triangle of his briefs, and his face polished with wetness.

"You've come to join us, Major?"

John shook his head and rose. The thing was broken in him.

"The major," said Marion, "takes his swim early in the morning. I have watched him from the parapet. He likes the beach all to himself." She smiled up at him, white teeth showing between red lips.

"The water was good," said the Colonel. But the words meant little. His eyes were on John, and he could sense the disturbance in the man. He saw the tiny, rapid flicker of a vein in the other's left temple. He looked back at Marion, wondering, but she had lowered her head and was running sand idly through her hands again

IT WAS a quarter to one the following night when Corporal March moved quietly into the dark shadows under the main gate arch. The new officer had a man sleeping in the gate-room each night and tonight it was Hardcastle. March could see him through the open door of the gate-room stretched out on a camp bed, asleep and snoring gently. He had told Hardcastle that afternoon to keep his ears and big mouth shut if he heard anyone slipping out.

At the main, double gate, now locked and cross-bolted, March took a key from his pocket and opened the small wicket gate cut in the large frame. It was handy, he was telling himself, to be able to make a key.

And, seeing that he wasn't on duty again until eight, why should he be locked in all night?

He puffed a little as he climbed the end of the long ridge that ran down from La Caldera. His haversack, full of stolen stores for Arianna's family—they'd do anything for corned beef and sugar—bumped awkwardly against his rump. He began to slant across the face of the ridge end towards the sea and finally struck a small track that followed the edge of the cliffs. Half an hour's hard going along this would take him to Ardino.

He stopped once for a breather and looked back at the dark fort. A single light shone narrowly from a window in the Bell Tower. One of the prisoners unable to sleep, he thought. Well neither could Marchy-boy sleep. The night was a good time for not sleeping. He thought of his London streets and the moon coming down coldly over the rows of narrow houses . . . the times he'd waited outside the Odeon for his girl to come out and they'd walked up the hill from New Cross to Blackheath. If he knew her some other fellow waited for her now. God, what he would give to be back . . .

Fifteen minutes later, against the moon-lit sky, he saw the bell turret of Ardino church lift itself from the hill slope and, remembering Arianna standing with her arms full of Madonna lilies, he blew the breath through his nose with a sudden snort of pleasure. The only light in Ardino was from the open door of the *Bar Filis*. He crossed the square to buy a bottle of *fundador*.

Ercolo, the proprietor, handed him the brandy and winking said, "It is good afterwards to be under the pines and drink."

There were two tables of card players tonight and they all laughed. March turned and went out. One of these days, he told himself, he'd push a few faces in. He went back across the square and down the slope to Arianna's house.

He threw a handful of soft dirt against her window, and when he saw her face, white against the grey gloom of the dirty glass, he raised a hand and then went round to the front door. It was unlocked and he pushed it open gently and stepped into the darkness.

He heard her cross the room. Then he felt her hands on his arms. He

kissed her, both of them awkward, easing the first shock of pleasure.

"Hullo, ducks," he whispered.

"Amor mio. . ."

He unswung the haversack and dropped its contents gently to the floor.

"For your old lady."

Holding her arm he slid out of the door and she closed it gently. They went down the hill slope, towards the path which he had travelled

THIS IS Colonel Fadid Sala Mawzi, Commander-in-Chief of the Cyrenian National Army, at half past one in the night, leaning out of his narrow window. He is fully dressed and, for each night he has been on Mora, the light has shone in his room. Between the hours of twelve and three he has stood, his elbows on the hard stone sill, and his mind set even harder than the stone against the thought that his vigil may prove futile.

This is a man with two snakes in his bosom. One is ambition and the other is Cyrenia, and they are intertwined so closely that they are one serpent with two heads, and the two heads strike his flesh and goad his body ceaselessly.

He stood there smoking and thinking of Walter Mietus. Days before he had said to him, "Wherever they take us you will come. Watch and you will find my window always lighted. Watch for three nights before you do anything. After that we will plan."

The door opened and he heard the soft shuffle of Abou's bare feet.

Abou said, "The cook who likes me has given me coffee and a little stove. I shall make coffee for the Colonel?"

"No, Abou. Go to your sleep. Sleep for me."

Abou bowed, but before turning to the door he said, "There was talk in the cook's place tonight of more men coming soon to be guards."

"They could send a hundred and it would make no difference."

"They send but six. There is much grumbling about it."

"Six is nothing, Abou. If they come in time then they are six more bullets to be used."

"The cook's death will grieve me."

"Death is always a grief to someone, Abou." For a moment he turned, his dark eyes on Abou, his face like a meanly fleshed skull "If I put the knife into your hand, Abou, would you take death to the cook?"

Abou made a little bow and his old hands went up in a slight gesture. "Put the knife in my hands, Oh Colonel, and I will bear with my grief."

"Then go to your sleep."

He turned back to the window and, five minutes later, the light for which he had waited suddenly sparked on the hillside far to his right. Colonel Mawzi waited. The light came again, winking faintly in the darkness for a while and then went again. He walked to the door and switched off the room light. He waited, and then switched it on, waited and then switched it off again and walked back to the window without hurry or excitement. He pulled a torch from his pocket and began to signal. It was a small torch, and from the hillside one would have needed keen eyes to pick out its tiny glow. It had travelled to Mora in the back of a long handled clothes brush.

Walter Mietus and Colonel Mawzi communicated for half an hour and at the end of that time, Mietus knew essentially as much about Fort Sebastian and its garrison as Colonel Mawzi did.

When Mawzi had finished signalling, he went down to Hadid Chebir's room. He shook Hadid by the shoulder and said gently:

"It is I."

The bed creaked as Hadid woke clumsily and sat up.

"What is it?"

Mawzi touched two fingers to the dry lips. "They have come."

"They?"

At the question contempt was strong in Mawzi. In the old days one touched Hadid on the shoulder and he was awake, his brain clear, the knife or revolver already in his hand. In the old days he was a man . . . not a shadow that drew courage from drugs

"Mietus and the others." His voice showed none of his feelings. "Roper, Lorentzen, Plevsky and the good Sifal."

There was silence for a moment, then the sound of Hadid easing himself back against the pillows.

"So," he breathed. "What is arranged?"

"Nothing yet. But tomorrow we talk again. More guards come to the island soon. It should happen before then. But for success the Governor must be here."

"You still think that is necessary?"

"Yes. It is not enough to escape. The thing must be an explosion. Its noise must carry round the world to put our names in every mouth and to rouse the madness in our people's blood. For this we need the Governor."

And he was thinking to himself, also we need your death to add the blood of a martyred son to that of his father.

Mawzi went out, closing the door quietly. A few steps below him was the door to Marion Chebir's room. Did she lie sleeping or awake? He stood in the darkness, and his imagination was strong in him. And the desire for her, running swiftly alongside his own elation, released now that Mietus had come, was like a thirst in his throat that cried for coolness. He turned and went back to his room and he was thinking of Major Richmond who that afternoon had risen from beside Marion on the beach and had stood in the sunlight and had raised a hand to touch his temple where a small vein kicked. He, too . . .

CHAPTER SIX

THE MOON was well up. In the pines above March and Arianna the warm night breeze sighed occasionally. They lay across her old raincoat, her head cushioned against his outflung left arm.

Arianna said, "In thy country the women work as they do here? In the fields and with the goats?"

"They work. Mostly in factories and shops."

"Even when they are married?"

"Sometimes."

"To bring more money?"

"Yes."

"I would like to see thy country. Only twice have I been to Port Carlos . . ."

He laughed and there was a sudden tenderness in him. "In my country," he said, "it is often cold and raining."

"I love thee," she said, "and if thou should ask me to would come back to thy country. But there I would be jealous. Ask me to come back with thee."

He didn't say anything.

His face a few inches from hers he looked into her eyes. She was simple and straightforward—not like some people he could think of that played fast and loose with a fellow. He thought of his Ma and Pa, and the others down the street if he turned up with a flashing-eyed Spanish piece. Oh, Marchy-boy.

"There is thy family," he said, puzzled because the idea was growing in him, fitting into something inside him. "And my country would be strange for thee."

"It would be strange But our loving would not be strange and children are born the same be it London or Mora." She sat up and held out her hands towards him. "These know how to work. In a factory if it should be that we need more money. I would keep thy house and be thy woman through all. I speak seriously for I love thee and it is in my mind that I might carry a child for thee, though it is not because of that that I speak so. It is of my own willingness that I have loved thee, not to find a husband, for that would be shameful."

Listening to her, he thought, when she talks, it is all God's honest truth. He touched her still open palm and could feel the smooth callouses that came from hoeing between the maize and vines, but the hand was small and a woman's hand, too. And then, without any thought of ever regretting it, without a word to the old Marchy-boy who should have known better, he knew what the score was.

"I love thee, too, Arianna When I go back to my country we will be married. It is with me now that I want no other woman."

She raised her palm and put it against his cheek and then leaning forward she said, "It is a good moment, *amor*. Such a good moment."

He left her sitting on the old raincoat, turning again and again as he followed the path to see her sitting there, raising his hand silently in salute, her's going to her mouth to send him kisses. It was a good thing



he had done. Dressed up she'd knock the stuffing right out of any other girl and she'd stick to him through thick and thin. And he'd stick to her. He didn't even have to worry about the baby now. Marchy-boy, the proud pa.

He smiled with the happiness in him and skirted a tall outcrop of rock that shouldered across the path. As he came round it he found himself facing three men who were following the track in his direction. They had been in single file but almost before he had seen them the file was broken, swiftly and silently, and now there was a man stopping him dead across the path and the two others were on his flank, crowding him, and all of them very still, watching him.

They stood full in the light of the moon. The man facing him stood awkwardly, body thrust forward and his legs bent outward, bowed but planted strongly and sturdily on the path. His eyes which had been on March's surprised face moved, drawn by the bone-white corporal's stripes on the soldier's arm, and the square face broke with a little smile.

March could half-see half-feel the others close to him. He didn't like it "Evenin' chums, nice night for a walk." He gave a forced little laugh and made a move forward

Walter Mietus put up his hand and March stopped at once. He knew a knife when he saw one.

"Here, what's the malarky?" He let his anger go freely to ease the fear in him.

"A moment," said Mietus in English. Then, his eyes still on March, he spoke to the other two in German.

"He is from the fort. He would talk."

"If he doesn't return, that will talk, too," said Roper.

"But not so loud or so clearly," said Sifal, who stood with his back to the sea and the cliff drop not ten yards away.

"Sifal is right," said Mietus.

"Then finish him. It's dangerous to stay here."

"I would like to use the knife but it would look wrong. You do it, Roper, when I move."

March had had enough. Who did they think they were and what was this Dutch talk?

"Put that knife away and let me pass. Who the hell——"

He said no more. Incredibly swiftly Mietus's right foot came forward and thudded into March's groin. He screamed chokingly and began to fall. As he did so Roper stepped in, swung one arm round his neck and with the flat of his free hand struck the back of March's head violently. There was a noise like the crack of a sappy branch breaking

Roper took his arm away from March's neck and let him drop to the path.

Mietus said, "Search him, Sifal. Take what a thief would take."

Sifal went through March's pockets and haversack. When he had finished Mietus and Roper picked up the body and carried it to the cliff

edge. Holding it by the wrists and ankles they swung it three times for momentum and then let it go out into the darkness of the cliff shadow.

JENKINS, the cook, was hosing the plants in the centre of the courtyard. Breakfast was over and he liked to get this job done before the sun rose too high. Now and again he flirled the spray high to the silver-grey leaves of the dragon tree and paused to watch it cascade down. It was going to be another scorching day, but for the moment all was damp and cool in the courtyard.

Hardcastle came across from the gate and stood at his side.

"Seen March this morning, cookie?"

"No."

"He went out last night and he ain't back yet. He's on guard duty in a few minutes. What shall I do?"

"If he's on duty right away you can't cover him any longer. Tell the sergeant. If old March loses his stripes it'll do him good."

Unhappy, Hardcastle went to Sergeant Benson's room, and reported the absence of Corporal March. Benson lit a cigarette and frowned.

"How'd he get out? Your key?"

"No, Sergeant. He's got one of his own. You know that."

"I don't know anything of the sort, officially." He spoke sharply. "What time did he go?"

"About one. I heard him but I was asleep, officially, Serg. You know what he's like. Are you going to shop him, Serg?"

"That's my business. We'll give him till ten and see. I'll fix the guard."

But at ten March was not back and Sergeant Benson could hide his absence no longer. He went up to the officers' mess and reported to Major Richmond.

John let the sergeant finish. "How did he get out?" he asked.

"Through the wicket gate in the main gate, sir."

"That's locked every night."

"Yes, sir."

For a moment John didn't say anything. He could see the unhappiness in Sergeant Benson. "Did he take Hardcastle's key?"

"No, sir. Hardcastle was sleeping fully dressed according to standing orders and the key was in his pocket."

"Hardcastle didn't hear him go?"

"No, sir."

"I see. It looks as though he's got a key of his own then, doesn't it?"

"It could be, sir."

"I'm damned sure he has. All right, get the jeep out and go over to Ardino. He probably made a night of it and is sleeping it off."

BENSON DROVE over to Ardino and went straight to the *Bar Filis*. Summoning up his rough Spanish he demanded brusquely of Ercolo:

"Was Corporal March here last night?"

Ercolo scratched his chest and nodded.

"Drinking?"

"Not here. He bought a bottle of brandy and went out." He winked at the sergeant. "Under the pines it tastes good."

"All right, that's enough of that. Do you know where he is now?"

"No, Sergeant."

Benson went down the slope to Arianna's house. She was sitting outside the door cutting up a pailful of beans. Standing in the doorway behind her was her brother, Torlo, sleepy-eyed, a cigarette drooping from his under lip. He wore a singlet and a pair of patched trousers. Dried fish scales stuck to his bare forearms like sequins. His hair was dark and tight-curled and he had a narrow, unpleasant face, the eyes close-set. Dog-face, March called him.

Sturdy, neat, his face shining with sweat, Benson stood before them. They looked at him and said nothing.

"I'm looking for Corporal March," he said.

"Not here," said Torlo.

"He was here last night."

"The whole night I was fishing," said Torlo indifferently.

"He was here all right," said Benson. He moved a little to make Arianna look up at him. "You know he was here."

"No, I have not seen him," said Arianna. If March was in trouble she had no intention of helping this sergeant.

"Don't beat about the bush with me," said Benson vigorously. "He came over to see you. He bought brandy at the bar. You both made a night of it and now the stupid fool is sleeping it off somewhere. Where is he?"

"I do not like the way you talk of my sister," said Torlo.

"That's too bad," snapped Benson. He moved closer to Arianna. "Where is he? It's for his own good I'm asking."

"Is he not at the fort?" asked Arianna.

"You know he isn't. Where is he, inside, sleeping it off?"

Benson made a move towards the door.

Torlo, with one hand on the frame, blocked the way.

"My sister said he did not come last night. Also I say he is not within." His voice was insolent, hostile.

"I'll see for myself," said Benson, anger and the heat rousing him.

Torlo smiled. "Here is the door. Try to enter."

His hands dropped towards the belt at his side. As he moved so did Benson. He stepped forward with astonishing quickness and had Torlo's wrist in his grip, holding his hand from the knife. For a moment they stood close together, their faces almost touching.

Behind them Arianna rose. Her face sullen, but full of dignity, she put out a hand and touched Torlo.

"Let the sergeant enter, Torlo."

Torlo shrugged, and Benson went into the house with Arianna and looked round. Coming out, feeling that he had let himself go too much, even a little ashamed, he said to Arianna, "I'm sorry. But we are worried about March. If you see him tell him to hurry back and I will try and save him from too much trouble."

At midday Benson was back at the fort without March.

"He's not at Ardino, sir," he said to John. "Or any of the places. But he was over at Ardino last night."

"Did you talk with his girl?"

"Yes, sir. She swears that he wasn't over there last night."

"Do you believe her?"

"No, sir. She's covering up for him."

John lit a cigarette. On stations like this men could get so fed up after

a few months that they just walked out with no other object than to keep away until someone found them and brought them back.

"He's probably hiding out. Anyway, just in case anything's happened to him, you'd better send a couple of men out along the cliff path to Ardino. That's the way he would have gone, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell 'em to have a good look round. He could have slipped and be stuck somewhere. Especially if he'd been drinking."

THE FIRST person in Fort Sebastian to learn what had happened to March was Colonel Mawzi. Walter Mietus signalled to him at two o'clock that night and gave him the news. The information which Colonel Mawzi passed back was equally interesting. Abou had learned that March possessed a key to the small wicket gate in the main door. The key would be with others which Sifal had removed from March's pockets. The question of an entry to Fort Sebastian had been one of the most difficult for Mietus to handle. Now it looked as though it would turn out to be the simplest.

Next morning, as they strolled on the parapet, Colonel Mawzi told Hadid Chebir and Marion. It was the first mention he had made to Marion that Mietus and his men were on the island. She could see that Mawzi was happy.

"Mietus," she said, "is a monster. Was there any need to kill this poor soldier?"

"There was every need," said Hadid. "Would you have had him come back and report that he had seen three strange men? Don't be a fool!" He spoke sharply, not looking at her.

"When this escape comes, will there be more deaths?"

"They are British," said Hadid. "Why should any be saved?"

But Mawzi was watching her closely, remembering again the tiny vein in Major Richmond's temple. Who was it she would save?

"There shall be no wanton killing. This I promise," he said.

"Let the escape be soon then, and see that Mietus understands"

She spoke stiffly, with an intense authority which roused Hadid to anger, but before he could do more than stir, Mawzi had spoken.

"You speak like this with a purpose?"

"You know I do. You say you want a peaceful, happy Cyrenia, but now I begin to think you are concerned only with fighting. I am sick of violence, and I'm sick of both of you. Until we escape I am with you. No one has ever questioned my loyalty. I've worked for Cyrenia . . . out of love . . . but when we are back there I shall leave. You will need me no more. I shall go to some other country and be forgotten." She was trembling a little, touched with amazement, for she had not known she was going to say this. She saw Hadid biting his lower lip and Mawzi, calm, smiling a little, and she knew that it was Mawzi who really understood and who was the more dangerous of the two.

Hadid said harshly, his voice rough with threat, "If you do anything against us you will not live."

Marion laughed contemptuously. "There would be a way to cut my throat? Maybe, but it would be Mawzi's hand that held the knife, not yours. It takes courage to kill a woman."

Mawzi slid forward between them. "What you ask for is just. When we are back in Cyrenia you shall be free and we shall be generous."

He turned away from her and began to walk slowly along the parapet. Unhappily, there was only one freedom waiting for her in Cyrenia. He saw her again, in his mind's eye, standing before them like a young cypress, speaking with the fierce tongue of a woman whose emotions are stronger than her wisdom. He was beyond understanding how in two years Hadid had never wanted to touch her. A woman could not be for ever held by the past. There must be a new budding and a new blossoming.

JOHN RICHMOND coming up the stone steps from the courtyard saw the three of them, widely spaced along the parapet. Marion Chebir was by the Bell Tower, elbows on the wall top, looking at the beach. He could see the slight hunch of her shoulders and the long line of her back. He could look at her this morning calmly. And in the calmness there was a detachment which he welcomed because he could regard her less as a distinct personality, than as a representative image of some future woman. He was sure now that when he went back to England

he would marry. Somewhere in the future there was a woman who would lean over a wall like this and he would walk towards her in the hot morning sunshine knowing she was his She would walk with him through the glasshouses at Sorby Place, admiring old Johnson's display of perpetual carnations. He could see the old gardener cutting one for her, always a Royal Crimson, and she would hold it to her face, loving the clove scent, and charming the old man

Marion Chebir, hearing his footsteps, swung round and said, "Good morning, Major."

"Good morning." He stopped.

"What a wonderful day," she said lightly. "I'd like to put on a pair of stout shoes and go for a walk. Up there, perhaps—" her head moved towards the far slopes of La Caldera.

"It's pretty rough going."

"Oh, don't be so dull. I don't care what it's like. Anyway I can't go, can I?"

"I'm afraid not." He smiled.

"It's ages since I really walked. When I worked in London I used to do it some week-ends with other girls. Take the train on Sunday mornings down to Sevenoaks or Lewes and just walk. Bread and cheese in a pub for lunch and then tea at some cottage. That all seems a long, long way from here. I loved London. A few weeks ago you were there?"

"Yes, I love it too." Something has upset her, he thought, or she wouldn't be talking like this.

She looked at him steadily, her head tilting a little.

"What are you thinking of now?" he asked.

She couldn't tell him, but it had suddenly occurred to her that when they escaped—and she had implicit faith in Mawzi, knowing it must happen—then he would take all the blame. She didn't know much about the Army, but it would probably affect his career Spontaneous sympathy for him flooded through her

"Is it so serious?" he asked humorously.

She shook her head, chasing away her thoughts. "I was wondering . . . I was trying to picture you in a War Office bowler and a dark suit."

"It's a homburg and pin-striped trousers."

"Do you carry a cane or an umbrella? I can't imagine you out of uniform somehow."

"A malacca cane with a silver handle, belonged to my father."

"I still can't see you out of uniform. You're like Mawzi. You're a soldier. And Lord help me, I'm tired of soldiers!"


She had turned away from him, and the turning and the tone of her last sentence was like a blow in the face. He stood there, surprised, and suddenly angry, but before he could do or say anything she as quickly turned back to him and said gently, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken like that. And anyway I wasn't thinking of you. I was just being sorry for myself."

He wanted to put out his hand and touch her arm, to show her that now he didn't mind. Instead, he said, "I only wish I could let you put on your walking shoes. Or, better still, your best hat and take you out to lunch at the Caprice"

He saw how the words touched her more surely than any movement of his hand could. Her eyes were full on him for a moment, then she turned away and almost inaudibly he heard her say: "Thank you"

And then, beyond her, drawing his attention, way down the steep slope to the beach he saw the movement of men. A small fishing boat had run hard up on to the black sand. Three men hauled it higher and then leaned over the side lifting something out clumsily between them. Even from this distance, as they rolled it to the sand he knew it was a body.

CHAPTER SEVEN

 **A**RIANNA was sitting under the pines where she and March had last been together. Yesterday she had heard of his death, and all night her grief had hardened in her until now it was a kind of calmness. She would never see him again, she would never go to England. As though with a knife a great part of her life had been cruelly carved away.

There was the sound of feet over the thick pine needles and Torlo sat down a few yards from her. He rolled a cigarette and lit it.

"It is time," he said, "that thou should return to the house. The officer comes to ask questions in a little while. Also it is time that we should speak for I know what is in thy mind."

Arianna watched the flare of his match.

She said, "There is much in my mind. There was always hatred between thee. If his death came from thy hand I will kill thee."

"It is true I did not like him, or any of these soldiers. But I did not kill him. This I swear. I would have killed him if he had made thee unhappy. I waited to know."

"He made me happy. I have his child. I would have gone back to England with him as his wife. This he promised the night he left me. If his death was not from thy hand it was from another."

"This I have thought of, too."

"When he left me he had not drunk. How can a man in bright moonlight slip over a cliff? He knew the path. Thou art my brother. For my unhappiness thou would kill. It is now that I am unhappy."

"Then I will kill. But there is much that I do not understand. I have found the place on the cliff where he fell. There the path is three yards from the cliff edge and there is no sign of slipping. But on the path there are many signs of other men."

"What men are these?"

"I do not know. But on La Caldera three days ago I found the remains of a fire in a gully, and two cigarettes which are not our cigarettes. It has been in my mind that because of the prisoners at the fort there could be strangers on the island."

"For the prisoners I care nothing. For these men if they killed him I have only one wish."

"Assuredly. Now, come back. The rest is with me." He stood up and she rose obediently and they went back along the path together.

FOR THE COURT of Inquiry John took Sergeant Benson and *Señor* Aldobran, the Wine Co-operative manager from Mora, with him to Ardino. Aldobran was to act as interpreter.

A small group of villagers was waiting for them as they drew up outside the *Bar Filis*.

Inside, the card players got up reluctantly and left. Ercolo, leaning on his bar, watched the three settle round the table.

Aldobran said, "Go to the door, Ercolo, and call them as we need them."

Untidy and unshaven, Ercolo shambled to the door.

"The girl first," said John.

Arianna was a long time coming. When she did John saw that she was not in working clothes but wore a black dress, black stockings and a black, thick mantilla over her hair. The clothes made her look dusty and shapeless. Only her face, handsome, set, and with a slight puffiness under the eyes had a grave, controlled dignity. Through Aldobran, John spoke to her.

"*Señorita Zarate*, you were a friend of Corporal March. His death is a great sorrow to you and I do not wish to make things harder. But for the sake of his parents in England and also because he was a soldier, I must ask you some questions. I hope you will help us."

"Yes, *señor*."

"Three nights ago Corporal March came to Ardino to see you?"

"Yes."

"When he left you he went back by the cliff path?"

"Yes."

"Was he sober when he left you?"

Arianna's head rose a little and her mouth stiffened.

"Yes."

If he had been drunk, thought John, she wouldn't say so.

"You think he slipped and fell over the cliff? There are no signs of slipping on the cliff anywhere that we can find."

"He is dead, *señor Major*." Her dark eyes were full on him. "What does the manner of his death matter?"

"It is my duty, *señorita*, to discover the truth. Can you think of anyone who might wish him harm?"

She was silent for a while. All these questions meant nothing. He was dead and now only one thing remained. Torlo had promised to take

care of that. This major was kind, he treated her with respect, but if strangers on the island had killed March and the officer was told about them then Torlo might never get his chance. She wanted to know that March had been avenged, here on Mora, and by her brother.

"*Señorita*," said John, "we are waiting. Do you know of anyone on this island who might wish him harm?"

"No, *señor* Major. I could not name anyone."

John let her go. Every moment she stood in front of him he realized was heavy with anguish for her.

Ercolo gave evidence that he had sold brandy to March. Torlo was called and John saw at once that the man hated their guts. He stood before the table, shoulders forward and one hand thrust into his belt.

On the night of March's visit he had been out fishing from dusk until dawn. There was nothing he could tell them about March's death. His manner began to irritate John, but he kept his temper.

Finally, John said, "Corporal March's death may have been an accident. But it may not have been. Can you think of anyone who might have wanted it?"

Torlo smiled, sucking at his teeth.

"Answer, man!"

It was Aldobran who spoke, but the words and the tone came from the officer.

That is how they spoke to you, thought Torlo. We are poor and we work hard and are of no importance, and so we are spoken to like this. It would be good to show them that others were better than they in some things. In his mind he knew suddenly what he would do. If there were strangers on Mora and they had killed March, he would kill them. That for Arianna, and then he would load their bodies on a cart and drive them to the fort and call out to this officer to come and see.

"Do you know anyone, Torlo?"

Straightening up, Torlo said, "If he had dishonoured his promise to my sister I would have killed him. But I did not. If he had taken my sister from some other man, that man would have killed him. But he did not."

"Thank you. That's all," said John.

MARION LAY in bed, wide awake. Outside she could hear the scrape of the guard's heavy boots on the parapet stones. All about her in this fortress were people of her own blood, a people she had schooled herself to regard as enemies. When you thought of people as enemies they lost their true character—they became symbols. For years she had had very few contacts with the British. She knew the Arab and Turkish mind, found herself thinking like an Oriental, fatalistic, callous. How had she been able to do that? Out of love for Hadid originally . . . he had dominated and changed her. But in the last two years that love had gone, and she saw now that with its going she had changed again. She wanted no more of Cyrenia. Out here that had become clear to her. The heavy robust faces of some of the guards, the way the cook sang in the courtyard and watered his plants This English passion for gardens. Time and again in the past few days she had thought of Swindon and London, of her father and his garden, cramped between tall brick walls, seeing him put out the empty orange halves to trap the earwigs from his dahlias. These were her people

To herself she said fiercely, I was a fool not to have ended it two years ago. I should have walked out and my grief would have passed and I could have lived. Some man would have loved me and love would have grown again in me. Somewhere a man would have put out his hands and gripped my elbows and I would have known from the shake in his hands, in the tightness of his grip all that was passing in him

She sat up suddenly, angry with herself, slid out of bed and turned on the light. From the bottom of her suit-case she pulled two black notebooks and took them to the small fire-place. Very deliberately she began to tear out the pages. When she had a small pile in the fire-place she set a match to them and, as they flared up, she tore more pages from the notebooks, feeding the flames.

The closely written record of the last ten years was gone. Until now there had always been pleasure in going through it, always some memory of the happy past to drive away the misery of these years of change.

But now it was all gone, and she sat on the chair before the

fire where a last few threads of sparks ran along the blackened pile of leaves, and felt free. She was disburdened; not Marion Chebir, not even Marion to herself so much as a nameless, uncertain person, awake from a long sleep yet still, for a while, held down from movement and thought by the fading memory of long dreams.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SIR GEORGE CATOR came into Neil Grayson's office and waved a hand at him to prevent him from rising from his desk. "I've been thinking, Neil. It's time I went over to Mora. The *Dunoon* will be in from patrol this evening. Teddy can take me over tomorrow. You might send a signal to Richmond and let him know I'm coming. He can fix me up at the fort for a night or two." Sir George began to move towards the door.

"Yes, sir." Neil stood up, frowning a little.

Plenty of people he would have no hesitation in hurting if they got in his way. But not this kind, considerate old man, who would be so hurt by a lack of respect for the proprieties. If a man fell in love with another man's wife . . . well, Sir George would expect that man to leave his house. And almost in spite of their calculated plans, their neat blueprint for the future, he and Daphne had fallen in love. It scared him a little that something inside him wouldn't let him stay until he could claim her out loud.

"Sir," he said, "there is something I should like to speak to you about."

"What's that?" Sir George turned, his hand on the door knob.

"It's something which I find very hard to say. Very hard indeed."

Sir George came a step back in the room. "What is it, Neil?"

"Well, sir . . . I've been with you a long time now, and I'm grateful to you for the many things you've done for me."

"Nonsense, Neil. You're a damned good A.D.C. Anyway, what is it? You want to move on?"

"Frankly, yes, sir."

"Don't blame you. What have you got in mind?"

"Well, sir . . . I thought I'd go into industry. I've some friends in London who'd help me. And then . . . well, you know my political ambitions, sir."

"Of course . . ." Sir George seemed to be hiding a smile. "Well, why not? Could help you, too. I know the chairman of Talloid Chemicals. When do you want to go?"

"That's rather up to you, sir."

"But the sooner the better, eh? All right, we'll get this visit to Mora over and then we'll fix things up."

"Thank you, Sir George."

When the Governor had gone and Grayson had relaxed in his desk chair, the door opened quietly and Daphne came into the room. Every morning she did this now to smoke a cigarette with him and talk. It was innocent and natural, but the kind of thing Sir George might easily notice.

He stood up as she came across to him, tall and lovely and smiling. Her hands came out to him and just for a moment he touched them.

He led her to the window and sat on the sill, facing her, letting his eyes hold her.

"I've just spoken to your father about leaving," he said. "He took it very well."

"I don't want you to go."

"I must. I'd only stay if we were going to go to him together and explain things—"

"No, I must do that. By myself."

He lowered his head and kissed one of her hands. Lord, it was true, he thought, that people sometimes got more than they had ever deserved. He had always seen himself clearly. As far as the virtues were concerned he didn't come very high on the list. Any of Teddy Burrows's friends could have found the right words to describe him. And yet, now, within himself, and within herself, too, he knew that the thing had happened which made it right.

He stood up. "I must phone Richmond," he said. "We're going over there tomorrow for a couple of days."

For a moment she put her arms round him, holding him closely to her, resting the side of her face against his. This is the thing, she thought, that is in so many people's mouths, shrieking at you from hoardings, headlines in the papers, the unknown, not understood until it happened thing, and when it happened it was like nothing that had ever been in print or words or thoughts before.

He put his arm round her shoulders and went to the door with her. "Outside with you," he said, "I've got work to do." His voice was full of tenderness.

AFTER GRAYSON's telephone call, John called in Sergeant Benson and told him to prepare for the Governor's visit. The last part of Grayson's conversation had been concerned with a Colonial Office intelligence report which had arrived on the Sunderland flying-boat that morning. There was a Cyrenian rumour of Hadid Chebir's return. This could be propaganda, put out to keep up the hopes and spirits of his adherents. But it would be foolish to overlook the other possibility. He decided to walk down to Mora to have a word with *Señor* Aldobran of the Wine Co-operative.

Aldobran was in his office. Fat, perspiring, his loose shirt sleeves flapping round his hairy wrists, he gave John a warm welcome and set a bottle of sherry and two glasses on the desk. John told him about the Colonial Office report.

"It may be nothing at all, but as Commanding Officer here I can't ignore it."

"Naturally, Major. I passed the word to my people as you asked me to, but they have seen no strangers, nothing odd. But then . . ." He lifted his glass of sherry, spinning it by the thin stem. "The south part of this island is very wild. Strangers could stay there without being seen. Also up on La Caldera . . ."

"I've been thinking about that too. The trouble is that I've got such few men. I can't take them away from the fort for patrol work . . ." John paused for a moment. "The Governor's coming tomorrow for a couple of days. The *Dunoon* will be lying off Mora all the time so I shouldn't imagine anything could go wrong until he's left. But after

that do you think you could find me twenty men? I'd like to go right over that part of the island."

"Easily, Major. There are wild pig there you know. We could make it a little sport, too."

Back at the fort John again sent for Sergeant Benson. Excluding the cook he had ten men. He split them into two guards of five men each, and each guard was to do a twenty-four hour duty.

"At night one man on the tower guard, one on the gate and to patrol the courtyard, three sleeping, fully dressed in the gate-room. They'll grumble like hell about it, but it's got to be done."

"Are you expecting trouble, sir?"

"We're here to expect trouble, Sergeant. Don't think this is a lot of bull to impress Sir George Cator."

"I don't, sir, but that's what the men will say."

John smiled. "I can imagine all the things they will say. But the fact is that we can't take the risk of just a tower guard at night and a man sleeping in the gate-room."

After Benson had left the room, the thought of escape was strong in John's mind. He walked out into the corridor and then up the short flight of steps to the parapet. On the far parapet walk were the three prisoners. Down in the courtyard, Jenkins and Abou were seated outside the cook-house. A couple of men were working on the fort's three-ton lorry. The gleam of sunlight on the lance-tipped leaves of the dragon tree caught John's eye. He knew all about the tree from Jenkins. Over a thousand years old, renewing itself, growing all the time and weeping blood at moments of tragedy . . . Well some of the things that went on in the world today were terrible enough even to make trees weep. Men were past weeping . . . As he turned away he was thinking of poor March.

THE DAYLIGHT was going fast. Standing just inside the door of Colonel Mawzi's room Abou could see the great wedged and jagged shadows on the steep scar of the hill outside. Colonel Mawzi stood by the window, his lean face lowered a little in thought. Hadid Chebir sat on the bed, one leg swinging nervously.

Colonel Mawzi looked up suddenly and smiled at Abou.

"You are certain of these details, Abou?"

"Nothing is more certain, my Colonel. The Governor comes with his A.D.C. tomorrow morning. He stays in the officers' quarters one night for certain."

"It must be tomorrow night then?" said Hadid.

"That is agreed," said Mawzi. He began to tick off the points on his fingers. "All spare men sleep in one dormitory on this side of the courtyard. The sergeant sleeps by himself, the cook, also. Then there is the gate guard, and the one guard outside the tower here. Mietus will have to move quickly. What about the lorry, Abou? There were men working on it today."

"It is a routine maintenance they do. The lorry is good."

"And the key to this tower, Abou?"

"The guard carries it in his pocket."

"Whoever releases us must bring arms. We can then go to the parapet steps that lead down to the officers' quarters in the long mess-room corridor. Mietus's people will come from the other end. The door to those stairs is not locked?"

"No, Colonel."

"The men sleep with their arms by them?"

"In the barrack-room, Colonel, they are in racks by the door. In the gate-house each man has his rifle by him."

"And Major Richmond?"

"His belt and revolver hang on the wall by his bed."

Hadid stood up. He was restless and impatient, a man of many fears. Tomorrow night he would be brave but only because he would help himself to courage.

"It is the destroyer that worries me," he said.

"Once we have the fort the destroyer will do nothing. But we must have the fort."

Hadid opened his mouth to say more, but Abou put up his hand, his head cocked towards the crack of the door, which he was holding open an inch or two. Suddenly his thin, old body relaxed and slowly he drew the door open.

Marion came up the last two stone steps and paused on the threshold. She looked from Mawzi to Hadid and back again. She had no need to ask what they had been discussing.

"It is tomorrow night for certain," Mawzi said. "Just before dawn."

"What is required of me?"

"Nothing. You will stay in your room and wait. In a few hours Mietus will be signalling. Then I shall pass my plans to him."

She was silent for a while. Now that she had said she would leave them once she was free she knew she could expect no confidences.

"There will be violence. I know this is inevitable. And some will die."

"Some will die," Mawzi echoed her words.

"And the Governor?"

"He comes to Cyrenia with us. But the British will not want him to die. Should we either, since he will be a weapon in our hands? No, he will live and one day write his autobiography, telling of his experiences as a prisoner of Colonel Mawzi and pretending to a great knowledge of Cyrenia affairs."

It was a joke, and since he did not often make jokes he turned, looking from one to the other in his pleasure. But, as he half smiled at Hadid, he was thinking, *He does not even notice that I say a prisoner of Colonel Mawzi where another would say the prisoner of Hadid Chebir.*

"And Major Richmond?" asked Marion and she held herself tightly, forcing herself to put casualness into her words because, sitting in her room below, she had been thinking of him, not understanding why her concern in this affair should seem to centre round him.

"Major Richmond,"—Mawzi moved closer to her and ran one hand slowly over his tight, smooth hair—"will come with us as far as the beach at Ardino . . ." He paused with a deliberate cruelty for he had not been deceived by Marion. A lesser man who wanted her, he thought, might have felt jealousy. But there was no jealousy in him. It was natural that as she neared freedom she should wake again as a woman. "But on the Ardino beach," he said, seeing the thinning of her lips as she waited to know, "we shall leave him."

TEDDY BURROWS walked through the garden to the point that overlooked Port Carlos. Hands in his pockets, he stared down at the lights of the town. Distantly, from the house behind him, he could hear music and the sound of Daphne's laugh He shut his eyes, his face tightening.

The last three hours had been terrible for him. Before dinner he'd gone into Grayson's office to collect his mail. In a cheap envelope, unstamped, addressed in pencil the letter awaited him half-way down the pile of London mail The phrases in a mixture of Spanish and bad English stuck in his mind

With a movement of swift revulsion he turned away from the sea and lit a cigarette. The thing was a filthiness in the mind. Only a fool would take any notice of an anonymous letter . . . some servant who'd been sacked, or someone Daphne had offended

Damn it, Teddy, he told himself—you know better than to take any notice of a thing like this. Nobody's telling you anything. You know perfectly well that now and then Daphne has dinner with some of the flying-boat captains and a moonlight bathe But nothing more. Not with Daphne . . . and Grayson of all people. He wouldn't dare anyway. Too careful about his career . . . no scandal.

All through dinner he'd watched the two of them . . . with old Sir George bumbling about some plant he'd discovered . . . and not a sign. For goodness' sake, Teddy—pull yourself together. If you really believe it, go and tackle Grayson. Get it over. But if you don't believe it, forget it. It's just a filthy anonymous letter with no truth in it—

He walked slowly back to the house and a burst of laughter from the terrace greeted him as he went up the steps. Sir George was reading and Daphne and Grayson were playing a game with dice and a shaker.

"Teddy"—her voice, gay with pleasure, greeted him, "—come and sit in on this!"

"Yes—" Grayson stood up. "You play her. I've lost all I can afford, and I've got work to do." He smiled as he slid away from his chair. "Watch her—she cheats like fury."

"That's all right—so does Teddy. Come on, darling—"

She reached up with one hand towards him, and under the terrace

lights he thought she looked more lovely than he had ever known her to look. For a moment he held her hand before sitting down and suddenly he was calm and happy. The truth was here, in the way she smiled at him.

"All right, you shark," he said affectionately. "See if you can fleece me. I was born with silver dice in my mouth——"

CHAPTER NINE

FROM the afternoon of the previous day Torlo had been up on La Caldera. This mountain he had known since he was a boy. The rim of its crater was broken and craggy and the first afternoon he had lain there between two boulders on the edge of a four hundred feet drop. Until sunset he had watched the great crater bowl below him. Nothing had stirred among its loose stone slides and clumps of bushes. To the north-west of the crater there was a small pool, the glitter of its water almost obscured by a growth of rushes. He had watched the pool with interest. This was the only water on La Caldera. No one had gone to the pool during daylight.

He had left his hiding-place an hour before the moon was due to rise and gone northward until he was above the pool. Here, he moved silently down the side of the crater, going easily in the darkness as though he were in his own house crossing a darkened room without once touching furniture. A handful of fire-flies flickered over the myrtle bushes and the night air in his nostrils had a rich, dry smell.

For two hours he had waited on a ledge thirty feet above the pool and finally there had been the sound of movement. Then against the moonlight, he had seen the bulky shape of a man rise from the pool and turn away. Torlo had followed him, guided mostly by the sound of the water slopping about in a half-filled can. After fifty yards he had turned back: he knew where the path led which the man was following. A hundred yards farther on against the foot of the crater wall was a disused shepherd's cave, the front barricaded with a bamboo palisade.

When dawn came Torlo was lying hidden four hundred feet above

the cave and not five yards from the track which men would take if they wanted to leave the cave and travel north to Mora.

Now, long after the daylight had gone, he was still in his hiding-place. All day he had watched the patch of ground before the cave but no one had moved across it. He was not surprised. If these men wanted to keep their presence a secret they would move only by night.

Torlo had patience, and at last he was rewarded by the sudden sound of a stone rolling on the path far below him. He lay there listening and watching. After a time there came gently to him the noise of men breathing. In his mind he could see them coming up from the crater, setting their back muscles to the slope, their hands knuckling on to their knees to give them purchase.

He moved his head slightly and marked the place at the crater edge where the dark ground gave way to the less dark night sky. After a while he saw a shape rise from the ground like a small cloud and pass. And then another shape. And another. And yet another. Torlo waited. Four men had passed, going in the direction of Mora.

He turned and followed them. The four men moved slowly and carefully and Torlo had an admiration for their movement. There was one man ahead on the track and two others on each flank, and the last man on the track a good fifty yards behind. They let nothing alter their formation and, although they never stopped, there was always, it seemed, one man without movement, his head casting round until another would stop to watch and he would move on. There is no animal, thought Torlo, with the cunning of man when he has got wickedness in him, and his lean dog face worked with pleasure at his own craft as he followed them. If their movement was like that of the fox coming down to the hen roosts his passage behind them was like the brown floating of an owl, all silence and velvet.

It took them two hours to reach the cliff edge a quarter of a mile from Fort Sebastian. They converged together in a small clump of oleanders, Torlo fifty yards behind and above them. It was now long past midnight, and there were few lights in the fort. Two rooms were alight in the Bell Tower and there was a light inside the courtyard. After a very long time one of the lights in the Bell Tower went out.

A little while after that Torlo saw the small needle eye of a torch flick on and off from the darkened room. Below him for a moment until a hand cowered it he saw the answering flick of a torch from the oleanders.

Torlo had no need to watch the men any longer. He rose and went along the cliff path to his house. He pushed open the door and went into the darkness of the main room and then up the stairs to his sister's room. He entered and reaching her bed went softly on to his knees and stretched out his hand and found her arm.

"Torlo." Her voice had a quiet, wakeful impatience.

"I have come," he said, keeping his voice low, "from the cliffs by the fort. Four men were there. Thy soldier must have met them on the path and they killed him to keep the secret of their being here. Everything is clear to me. They signal to the fort."

"Is it to be done tonight?"

"While it is still dark, before dawn. Thou wouldst be there?"

"Who else has the right? I wish to see them die and to spit on them. How is it to be done? With thy gun?"

"No," said Torlo thoughtfully. "With a gun nothing would be certain against four. These are men of great cunning. They live in the old cave in the crater and do not leave it by day. At night they come out for water and to go to the fort to signal. Soon now they will be back."

"How is it to be done?" Arianna asked.

"With the hand grenades," said Torlo.

"Ah, yes," sighed Arianna. "It is right that it should be thus."

"More than right," said Torlo. "For it was thy soldier who brought them to us. Remember how when he first came to know thee we would go fishing together——"

"I have no need for the memory," said Arianna quickly. But all the same it was with her. March, to win favour with them, had brought the hand grenades from the fort and they would row out along the cliffs beyond Ardino. He had shown them how the grenades worked and how to toss them out into the water. One counted five as they sank and then the water would convulse itself and spout high, drenching the boat with spray, and in a little while the fish would float round them like palm leaf ribs, white and limp.

"There are four left," said Torlo, "but two will be enough. Before dawn we shall go up there."

MARION CAME out of her sleep slowly, lost for a while in the amorphous darkness, but feeling a hand on her arm. She lay there very still and slowly her mind made shape and sense of the darkness. She was on Mora, in Fort Sebastian, and this bed was against the stone wall of the room, the head towards the window.

The grip on her arm tightened a little and then the hand left her and Mawzi's voice said, "You are awake?"

She said, "Yes," and the word she spoke sounded strange because of a sudden clot of nervousness in her throat. She heard his body move and the creak of her bedside chair on which he was sitting.

He said, "A little while ago I finished talking to Mietus. Everything is arranged. Tomorrow, sometime, Sifal will radio instructions for the flying-boat. You are pleased?"

"Yes," she said, "I am pleased." But she knew, too, that she was frightened. She could hear the excitement in Mawzi's low voice and his hand had come back to rest lightly on her bare arm. "You have told Hadid?"

She heard him breathe contemptuously through his nostrils. "A jackass could bray in his ear without waking him. You know how he is when he has need to kill his fears. Tomorrow he will be as brave as a lion."

"I am sorry for him."

"He is not a man. Let us forget Hadid."

His hand was moving on her arm now, and there was dismay and exhaustion in her almost to the point of apathy.

"If you wish to talk of this escape, talk," she said. "But that is all."

"With the lips," he said calmly, "there is no need to talk. We have come through much together. We have shared hope, and danger and sorrow and small triumphs. We have each put our honour into the other's hands. So much we have shared that there is little more, but that little the thing that makes us man and woman."

His hand moved to her shoulder and she put up her own hand and

held his wrist firmly. "Go, Mawzi," she said and the darkness and his near presence were stifling in the hot room.

"I cannot," he said. She felt his wrist shake under her fingers and she knew his face was above hers because his breath touched her forehead as he said, "Through your shoulder I feel your heart beating, like the heart of a wild bird when it is held in the hand. There is no need for fear. See, I will calm the fear." His free hand was moving towards her heart and the touch was like the sudden sear of burning. As his lips came down to hers she twisted from him and bit into the hand that held her wrist. The sound of his pain was a sharp explosion of breath close to her face and she slid off the bed, hitting the small table and hearing the lamp smash to the ground. Free of him for a moment she pulled herself towards the door and shouted. Then he found her and his hand came round her mouth and his free arm circled her waist, lifting her. She fought and struggled and heard him laughing deep within himself and knew that he was full of pleasure in this fight. There was a great sobbing knowledge in her that she had not enough strength to fight him for long. Suddenly she collapsed and the dead-weight of her body took him by surprise and she slipped to the floor. She lay there in a black tiredness and she could hear him breathing hard in the darkness and her whole body shook with a great spasm of revulsion as she waited for the moment when he would lift her.

But the moment never came. The black nightmare blazed with a blinding whiteness. She saw Mawzi standing above her and then, beyond him, Major Richmond in a dressing-gown, his hand still on the light switch by the open door.

Mawzi turned. His shoulders stiffened and his body hunched forward and he moved quickly towards Richmond.

"Get out!" he cried. "Get out!" His voice was shaking and tense like a master incensed by the interruption of a stupid servant.

Marion saw Richmond's eyes marking her beyond Mawzi and the angry jerk of his cheek muscles as though somewhere inside the flesh a mass of leather thongs had tightened. He stepped forward quickly. She saw his hand swing up and down and there was a curious wonder in her that the fingers were held straight and stiff, not bunched to a fist.



The hard edge of his right hand struck Mawzi against the side of the neck. Mawzi gasped and toppled and then the Major's left fist came up in a quick arc and struck Mawzi on the chin as he fell.

JOHN MOVED aside and stood over Mawzi. Sergeant Benson had come to the open doorway behind him and beyond Benson she saw Abou.

"All right, Sergeant," he said. "Take him up to his room. Abou will give you a hand."

Mawzi was shaking his head and sniffing as they lifted him. He was hard, thought John. Most men would have gone out cold. He watched them carry him through the door, rubbing the edge of his right hand which had gone numb from the blow. Then he turned.

She was still on the floor, half-sitting. She was shivering and he could see her bare shoulders rise and fall as she breathed with the deliberate effort people make, after shock, to restore themselves.

The way she sat there raised a swift compassion in him, a tenderness. As he moved towards her, seeing the thrust of her sun-browned leg against the grey floor, the torn silk of her nightdress, and the distress in her face, he burnt with anger against Mawzi.

She looked up at him and he could see that she was trying to smile at him, to make some sign of thanks. He bent and slipped a hand under her arm.

"Come up," he said gently.

She stood up and breathed deeply and she said, "Thank you." He held her for a moment, steadying her. Then he withdrew his hands carefully as though he had built something to a delicate balance that any rough movement could destroy. He picked up her dressing-gown from the floor by the bed and, standing by her side, draped it over her shoulders. As she moved into it she moved closer to him so that with all the naturalness in the world his arm was round her and she had dropped her head against his breast.

"It's all right," he said and his arms tightened to contain the trembling of her body and he bent his head and let his lips touch her forehead, and the thing that was happening between them seemed so

right and inevitable that there was no surprise in him, only a great warmth and desire to hold her in his protection. Very slowly she looked up at him and smiled and he knew that she was free of the horror and he bent and kissed her briefly on the lips and the kiss was between them so lightly and freely and then over that it was hard for Marion to know that it had happened.

"Get back into bed," he said and moved away from her.

She obeyed him, climbing into the bed while he righted the chair and picked up the bedside table and broken lamp. He turned back to her and said, "Benson will fix you up with another lamp in the morning. Is there anything you want now? A drink, maybe?"

"No, thank you." Stretching into the bed she was aware of a happiness in her which was so strange that she felt she would want more time than the world held to examine and enjoy it. He bent over her, tucking the bed-clothes round her, and she had to laugh a little at his seriousness and the sudden feeling she had that she was a child being tucked away for the night, and her laughter made him pause.

Very simply, she pulled her arms from the bed-clothes and drew his face down to hers and this time they kissed with a full and ardent admission of everything that was between them and yet not ready for words. She could feel the wetness of the tears behind her eyes and the slow tearing relief in her body as though, somewhere deep in her, there was a sudden miraculous thawing that split the frozen stretches of loneliness which had been all she had known for years.

John drew away from her, standing up but leaving his hand in hers so that from looking up at him she turned her head slightly and kissed his palm before it left her.

He stood by her for a moment and smiled at her and she smiled back, and then he went to the door and switched off the light and went out.

Going now to the main parapet door, he tapped on it. Outside he heard Sergeant Benson stir and then the grate of the key in the lock. John stepped outside, but he motioned Benson not to shut the door.

"You took him up?" he asked and felt in his dressing-gown pocket for his cigarette-case, absently forgetting it was not his tunic.

Benson fished into the pocket of his bush shirt and held out a packet of cigarettes. As John lit one he said to the sergeant, "Have one yourself. Tonight we can break the guard rules."

"Thank you, sir." Sergeant Benson lit himself a cigarette and standing by him John was glad of his simple, solid presence.

"He's pretty sick . . . real sick, I mean, sir. Vomiting. You half-killed him, sir." There was admiration in Benson's voice.

"I should have killed him," said John. "But there would have been hell to pay."

Sergeant Benson said, "The other one must be a sound sleeper. Not a peep out of him. He's an odd bird . . . If you walk by him he doesn't even look up. I suppose in Cyrenia he's a different man altogether. Mopey is the word for him here. . . ."

John stirred and dropped his cigarette to the stones, screwing the end out with the heel of his slipper. "I should keep this to yourself, Sergeant." He laughed quietly. "I don't want it to be reported that I struck a prisoner, no matter how necessary it was."

"Of course, sir."

"I'll go up and have a look at Mawzi before I turn in."

He turned into the tower and went up the stone steps. There was a light showing under Colonel Mawzi's door and John opened it without knocking and went in.

Mawzi was sitting on his bed, drinking a cup of coffee which Abou had made him.

John said stiffly, "Colonel Mawzi."

"Yes?"

John said biting, "Colonel Mawzi, I am addressing you as the Commanding Officer of Fort Sebastian. Stand up when I speak to you."

Mawzi hesitated for a moment and then came slowly to his feet. The hatred in his face blazed suddenly.

"I am warning you," John went on steadily, "that in view of your behaviour tonight if you cause any more trouble I shall lock you in your room in solitary confinement for a week. Is that understood?"

Mawzi's nostrils narrowed and his mouth became a paper-thin line.

"You make yourself very clear, Major Richmond."

"Good. That is all."

John turned and left the room.

He went slowly across the dark landing and down the steps to the level of Hadid Chebir's room. There was no light from under the door. How could the man, he thought, have slept through all this? On an impulse he put his hand to the door and went in. The room was hot and so stuffy that he felt the windows could not have been opened for days. From the direction of the bed came the faintest sound of breathing. The man was asleep. John flicked on the light. Let it wake him up, he thought.

This was Marion's husband, this was the man who should have been in her room full of protection and gentleness, full of . . . He went to the bed, frowning.

Hadid lay stretched out on the top of the bed-clothes almost naked, a long length of pale brown body. His mouth was open with just the rounded edge of his tongue showing, destroying all the fineness of the face, turning intelligence to a dull idiocy. The body, too, was relaxed and heavy. John recognized this familiar collapse of feature and body. He put his hand to the man's face and raised one of his eyelids. The pupil was small.

He straightened up, knowing something that he had always suspected. The man was drugged.

Looking down at Hadid, he felt sorry for him not angry. Years ago at Oxford he had been a young man, straight and fine-muscled, alive with grace and vigour. In those days John had sensed, a little hopelessly, the desire to be a painter, and with him now was his most pertinent memory of Hadid under the shower after a rugby game, water gleaming over his brown skin making a light and colour compact that you found only now and again in the flesh of some of Velasquez's paintings. He remembered, too, the incongruity that sharpened the emphatic beauty of the rest of Hadid, the irregular stain of the large birthmark the man carried just to the left of his navel.

Looking down at the man now, stretched long and dark against the pale covers, his body naked except for the briefest slip of cloth that had been twisted native fashion across his loins, John saw that the stomach

flesh to the left of the navel was smooth and brown, unmarked He stared down, shock slowly mounting in him.

He leaned forward, unbelieving, suspecting some trick of the bad light, or of his own eyes and memory. But there was no mistake. This man carried no mark.

This wasn't Hadid Chebir. This could never be Hadid Chebir. Everything else, face, hair and figure, even the texture of the skin was Hadid Chebir. But the man who lay drugged on this bed was not Hadid Chebir.

CHAPTER TEN

THE MOON had long set when they left the house. The night was a warm cloaking darkness, full of a waiting silence, as though it were impatient and longing for the first bird sound or flicker of dawn to give it leave to go.

By the time they got up to the crater, Torlo calculated, it would be almost dawn. The light would be just right, dark enough to hide his approach to the cave and yet greying so that he could see to throw his hand grenades accurately. He had all four of them in his pocket.

He walked a little ahead of Arianna, neither of them talking, but he knew she was there, close behind him, as familiar with the path as he was. Half-way up they paused to rest and Torlo whispered what he wished her to do.

When they reached the crater edge she was hot and sweating and one wing of her hair had come loose, clamping damply against her face.

Torlo put his hand to her arm and pushed her gently away. She left him and began to make her way quietly round the rim of the crater. Torlo sat down by a boulder and lit a cigarette, keeping his head down and shielding the glow. He gave her good time to move round and make her way down to the pool. She would wait there until the grenade was thrown. When he had finished his cigarette he nipped the glowing end out between his hard finger-tips and then rose. The sky was beginning to grey in the east like the pelt of an old mule. He went to the edge of the path down to the crater. The blackness below

him was hard and unmarked, like the entrance to a great tunnel that bored into the heart of the world. Very slowly and cautiously he began to move down, keeping one hand on his jacket pocket to stop the movement of the grenades. As he went he was smiling for he was hearing himself describe this night. It was a story that could be told for the rest of a man's life. That one, they would say as he passed, is Torlo Zarate of Ardino; and the men would look at him with envy and the women would have a softness in their eyes and not notice the ugliness of his face. . . .

His feet touched the sunbaked earth and grass at the bottom of the crater. He waited, listening. Arianna must be down by the pool now, not two hundred yards away.

Ten yards from the cave he stopped and crouched close to the ground. The greyness of the eastern sky had spread now like a rising tide and was lapping over the rim of the crater. Somewhere by the pool a bird got up and went away into the night with one short, solitary call.

He stared now at the rock face ahead of him. The bleached stems of the bamboo palisade shone whitely. The barrier to the cave mouth was about four feet high and there was a gap of two feet above it before the cave roof was reached. To toss his grenades over the top of the palisade was easy. Inside now they would be sleeping. They would have fetched their water for the coming day. They would be tired from their trip down to the cliff above the fort. Torlo could see them lying in there on the dry palm fronds, four men asleep and secure, or maybe one would be drowsily on guard, wishing for sleep, too.

He stood up slowly, his teeth biting with pleasure into his lower lip and he pulled out two grenades. He held one in each hand and worked them round in his palm so that his teeth would come easily to the pins. He raised his right hand to his mouth and pulled out the pin, spitting it from him. Then he slung the grenade from him, the striker lever twisting in the air like a dead leaf. With the movement, though his eyes followed it and saw it curve over the top of the bamboos, the other grenade came up to his mouth. He threw it after its fellow and then dropped to the ground, sheltering behind a small boulder which he had marked for the purpose.

The thing that happened then was a delight to him. As the second grenade disappeared over the top of the palisade there came from the bowels of the cave a low, heavy crunch of sound. Then the full blast of the two explosions burst in the belly of the rock with a long, throaty rattle.

The palisade was swept away, the white shards of bamboo stick mingled with a cloud of dust and stones. Part of the cave mouth collapsed and rolled forward making a long slithering sound in the growing morning light.

Torlo stood up. From the greyness to his right Arianna appeared and came to his side. Together they looked at the half-blocked cave mouth. Somewhere inside a rock fell and then there was silence.

Torlo put out his hand and found Arianna's wrist.

"It is done," he said and he breathed deeply, the dust-filled air sweet in his lungs.

"It is done," said Arianna, and very slowly she crossed herself. "And now I would look on them."

Torlo nodded, but before they could move towards the cave, there was a sound behind them which leaped into Torlo's ears clear and full of meaning. It was the sound of a heavy boot striking against loose rubble, the sound a man makes who no longer cares for caution.

Torlo swung round, stepping in front of Arianna. Facing them on the edges of the open space before the cave were five men.

Torlo cried, "Run!" to Arianna and pushed her away. His free hand came down, searching for the grenades that were still in his pocket. The man in the centre of the semicircle raised his right hand. There was an ugly, muted explosion. The bullet tore a great hole in Torlo's left breast, spun him round and dropped him to the ground.

Arianna ran, swerving towards the cave mouth like a trapped animal. A narrow break ran up the rocks at the side of the cave and she reached it and began to climb upward, scrambling and fighting to escape.

Behind her the five men stood unmoving and Mietus, who had killed Torlo, raised his revolver again and fired at her as she was about five feet from the ground. The bullet smacked against the rock a foot from her face. Sharp stone splinters tore into her right cheek and

Arianna fell. She hit the ground by the cave mouth and her right leg doubled under her. She lay there without moving.

Mietus put his revolver into his pocket and walked over to her and the other men followed him. Her face was bleeding and her eyes were shut.

Mietus smoothed his worn, dusty-white hair. His mouth was tight with disgust. "The light was bad," he said, more for himself than the others. "But I should not have missed. One forgets that a suppressor makes them pull to the right."

He squatted on his heels beside Arianna and rolled her to her back. Seeing her right leg lying awkwardly under her he straightened it and for a moment both his hands were on her ankle.

"Broken."

He stood up.

"What do we do with her?" asked Plevsky. He was a little dark blackbird of a man with a habit of working his tongue in his mouth as though he carried a bad taste always.

"She must go," said Mietus. "But first carry her into the cave. When she comes round there is something I want to know from her. Plevsky, you stay with her. We shall go back to the other place. If anyone should come we shall be there."

"Nobody will come," said Roper. "This crater could swallow a thunderstorm."

They carried Arianna into the shattered cave, laying her on a heap of rubble, and then they dragged in Torlo.

"When she comes round," said Mietus, "make a signal and I will come down."

Plevsky watched them cross the crater and disappear into the shrubs. Then he lit a cigarette and looked at Arianna. Somewhere, years and years back in his life, he remembered a girl in Poland who had looked a little like this, dark, rich-bodied and with this peasant sturdiness. Then, seeing the fresh scarred sides of the cave, his mouth tightened a little. Why had he asked what was to be done with her? It was obvious. The dead man would have killed them all. What pity could the girl expect . . . ? They were lucky, he thought, very lucky . . . It was Sifal,

though, they really had to thank. Because of the interference to the reception on his radio set from the high crater wall he always opened his nightly communication with Max Dondon from the ridge. He had climbed up a little behind the rest of them that night, carrying his set, and had seen this man at the path top, watching. Sifal had followed him along the cliff path and to the house in Ardino, and then had come back to Mietus. The rest had been easy. Two of them had gone to the house and waited, while the others had hurried back to the cave to clear their stuff How calmly Mietus had handled it, cold as ice, and seeming to know what would be in the man's mind

MARION CHEBIR faced the new day, over her morning coffee, with a strange combination of misery and happiness. She was courageous and forthright enough to face the new facts which had come into her life. Yet, although the facts were new, she acknowledged that they had been slowly forcing themselves to life for many long months.

It had taken her two years to find her freedom and herself. Two years ago when her husband, Hadid Chebir, had been killed in a skirmish, the prestige of the Cyrenian National Army had been low. The news of his death would have taken the heart from his hard-pressed followers, and she had still been dedicated to Cyrenia. Colonel Mawzi had kept the death a secret, and a half-brother of Hadid, little known, but remarkably like him had taken his place Out of the grief for her lost husband, out of loyalty and love for him, knowing that for him Cyrenia had meant everything, she had agreed to the deception, regarding it as her duty, as a trust which she must honour.

But grief passed, even the memory of love dimmed, and slowly she had felt herself more and more divorced from Cyrenia, more and more anxious to find a new life For the new Hadid—a husband in name only—she had no respect. Coaching him in the details of the dead Hadid's past had been a bitterness with her And now it was not only the real Hadid who was dead but the Marion who had loved him. All that was gone, all the past . . . finished.

What was it, she asked herself, that finally awakened her? Not just a slow rebellion of the senses but always some quick knife-like thrust?

She loved John Richmond, and through her love for him she was now aware of all the others—the familiar guards, the cook, the sergeant—as human beings. Whether any part of Richmond's future would touch hers she could not possibly say. Loving him was the important thing. She could love again and that was a new freedom and the scales were off her eyes

Mawzi hated him and would make sure that he was killed. And not only his death, but the deaths of the other soldiers became a horror in her mind. At no matter what cost to herself, she decided now, there must be no more violence. Quite calmly, she knew that she would have to tell John Richmond about the coming attack. She would have to betray Mietus and Mawzi.

There was a knock on her door and Colonel Mawzi came into her room. He crossed to the table where she sat, with quick bantam strides, and stood looking at her.

"I realize," he said firmly, "that I am not welcome in this room."

Marion said, "That is a considerable understatement."

"Maybe. But it is necessary that we should understand one another. For last night, I apologize. I was foolish and brutal. We have worked together for many years and in that time I know that I have had your respect and your loyalty."

"Not any longer."

"That is the point. I can do nothing about what has passed. But I can make sure that through my foolishness you do not fall into a greater one which would endanger you and many people who must still be loved by you."

Marion stood up slowly.

"What is it you think I am going to do?"

"You could go to Major Richmond and tell him the truth about Hadid and also about the plan for tonight. You could, if you were very foolish and very angry."

"And if I did this thing?"

Colonel Mawzi slid his hands into his tunic pockets and narrowed his shoulders and the frown on his face furrowed his bony forehead deeply. "You would not live long to enjoy your treachery. Wherever they took

you, wherever they hid you, we would find you. Hadid might die and I might die, but there will be others who will remember and go on searching, and finally you would die."

"When one has little to live for there is no great pain in dying," said Marion, but she knew that she no longer felt like that.

"True, but there are others who do not wish to die. You have a mother and father in England——"

"No!"

For a moment, like the bright flicker of a steel blade, Colonel Mawzi smiled.

"Yes. A mother and a father, a sister and a brother who are married and have children. If a traitor escapes us there is always his family. You do not believe this would happen?"

"Yes, I believe it would happen," she said quietly. Suddenly the future was vividly with her. She saw her mother with flour up to her elbows in the kitchen, rolling out pastry and humming to herself, her father feet up on a chair in the garden on a fine morning reading the *Sunday Express* before he began disbudding his chrysanthemums, her brother holding his son's hand as the child learned to take its first steps . . . Oh, God, no! She put her hands across her eyes, pressing them against her eyeballs as the beastliness was flashed across her imagination in a series of vivid, frightening pictures.

WITH THE RISING of the sun, the wind which had been light all night, picked up, freshening from the south so that the *Dunoon* fought a little against her bow and stern warps as she lay alongside the refueling jetty at Port Carlos. The wind streaming across the cod-drying grounds sucked up the salty, sickly smell. Lieutenant Imray, noting the long streamer of mare's-tail cloud coming off the tip of Tower Hill, told himself that it would blow for an hour and then fizzle out.

Down below, Sick Berth Attendant Andrews stood in front of a small square of mirror fastened to the bulkhead and adjusted a pink eye-shade over his right eye. He grimaced as he noticed that the blue-brown edges of the black eye he was sporting still showed round the rim of the shade.

"If anyone asks," he said, "I'm suffering from conjunctivitis."

"A large steak is the answer, or a piece of raw liver," said Petty Officer Grogan. He sat at the mess table with a mug of tea and a cigarette.

Andrews sat down and lit a cigarette from Grogan's. "The bastard," he breathed, "I could have finished him by myself. But she had to butt in. Perfidious."

"What?"

"Perfidious. That's not a cruiser class. That's a class of woman. I walk in there last night with a bottle of vino, a silk scarf I picked up cheap and love in my heart."

"And you come out with a black eye."

"She helped him settle me—blast her! There he was sitting there, the big ape, and she purring away like a cat that's had the cream. Just got in on a banana boat this Alberto had, and his great banana fingers were pawing round my girl . . . All this time they're engaged and she never said a word to me about him!"

"You'll find another."

"In trouble friends are great comforts," said Andrews bitterly. "If we get shore leave in Mora I'll get drunk. It's the only way with a broken heart."

"Maybe I'll join you."

"Fair enough, Groggy. We'll celebrate my broken heart . . ."

ABOUT THE TIME that the *Dunoon* was leaving Port Carlos harbour with the Governor and his party, John Richmond was lying on his back in the Atlantic a few yards off the small beach below Fort Sebastian.

From instinct, strengthened by his army training, he liked to set down his problems clearly, make a frank appreciation of them and then decide on the best solution. Now he turned over, swam ashore slowly and waded out to his towel. Here goes, he thought; you've mulled it over long enough. Now get it down in black and white. Question and answer.

Do you love Marion Chebur?

Yes.

How can you be sure?

How can you be sure the sun will rise tomorrow? I love her now and here. I know this for myself, just as surely as I know for myself the difference between a good and a bad painting.

Does she love you?

Yes.

What immediate steps do you propose to take about this situation?

John lay back on his towel in the sun. This was the hardest question in the whole bag. He could go back to the fort now and find her, make his love clear and ask her to marry him. But that would also mean letting her know that he had discovered that Hadid Chebir was not the real Hadid Chebir. Was the real Hadid Chebir dead or alive? He assumed he was dead, but he couldn't be sure.

John stood up, wrapped his robe about him and shuffled his feet into his sandals. The hard fact remained that he had to do something. He climbed slowly up the cliff towards the fort.

In the Officers' Quarters he changed into a clean drill uniform for the Governor's visit. When he went up on to the parapet Colonel Mawzi was stretched in a deck chair under the awning that had been rigged for the prisoners. Hadid Chebir was pacing restlessly up and down between the Bell Tower and the Flag Tower. He looked a new man, alive and vital, charged with a forte that longed for release, like a panther turning and turning about its cage. Whatever drug he took, thought John, it obviously left him full of vigour and confidence.

Marion was reading in her chair by the Flag Tower. She looked up as John approached and, although her face was grave, she gave him a smile as she said good morning.

John put his hand into his pocket. He held out a key to her.

"Maybe you'd like to have this. It's the key to your room."

Marion took it, "You are very kind," she said quietly. "Thank you."

Behind him John could hear the crisp beat of Hadid's feet on the wide flagstones. He said quickly, "While the Governor is here it will be difficult for me to see you alone. I want to, of course. You must know why——"

"Please"

There was a sudden look of misery on her face which stirred him, confusing him while at the same time it woke a great tenderness and anxiety for her in him.

"I know," he said, "the thing's all over the place. God knows there will be difficulties. But the fact remains that I love you and you love me. That's all that matters. We can free ourselves from all this, and I can take you away. I'm not making any mistake about that, am I? You do love me?"

For a moment she sat there and he saw her shoulders shake a little as though a cold draught had swept over her. Then she was standing, close to him, almost touching him and her eyes were full on his and he saw the mist of near tears in them. "I love you, yes," she said in a whisper and then she was moving away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HM.S. DUNOON entered Mora harbour at five minutes past eleven. She dropped anchor, watched by the islanders who crowded under the palms at the foot of the rough wooden jetty. Standing by the fort's jeep towards the end of the jetty were Major Richmond and *Señor* Aldobran. The Governor came ashore with Neil Grayson. After a few words with Aldobran they got into the jeep and John drove them to the fort.

"I've asked Teddy Burrows and Daphne to come up and have some lunch with us," said the Governor. "Daphne insisted on coming along but of course she'll sleep on board. How is everything? Under control?"

"Yes, sir. Except for one thing, which I would like to tell you about before you see any of the three."

"Oh Trouble, eh?"

"Of a kind, sir."

At the gate the guard of honour was turned out, and then Sir George made a short tour of inspection before going up to the long mess-room over the gate.

John poured sherry for the three of them, and the Governor said, "Well, let's have it, Richmond."

Standing by the window, John told the Governor of the trouble between Marion Chebir and Colonel Mawzi the previous night. He avoided any reference to anything which had passed between himself and Marion; and then he described how he had looked in on Hadid Chebir.

"I should explain, Sir George," he said, "that I knew Hadid slightly at Magdalen. When I went in he was lying on his bed, more or less naked, and I should say drugged. At Oxford I'd seen Hadid under the showers naked many a time. One of the things I remembered about him was that he had an oddly shaped birthmark to the left of his navel."

"Well?" Sir George sipped at his sherry.

"This Hadid has no such mark. In other words, the man we've got here isn't Hadid Chebir."

"Good Lord!" Sir George made a violent gesture and spilt his sherry. "You're sure?"

"Absolutely. From the relationship between him and Marion Chebir, I'm equally certain they're not man and wife. Mawzi would never have dared to assault her if this Hadid was her husband. There's never been any doubt that it was a love marriage, that she was absolutely wrapped up in him"

Sir George put his glass down on the table and wiped the spilt sherry from his hand with his silk handkerchief. He stood there, a short, grizzled figure, bushy grey eyebrows frowning and he looked from Grayson to John. Then he said, "Has this Hadid ever recognized the fact that you knew one another at Oxford?"

"Yes, sir. But only in very general terms and made it clear that he didn't want to talk about it. I've no doubt that he's been well primed in the facts of the real Hadid's past."

"And why this deception? Have you thought about that?"

"Yes, I have, Sir George. Before I came out here Banstead told me that the War Office felt there was something wrong about this Cyrenia affair. But they could give me no lead at all. My theory is that the real Hadid was killed some time ago in the Cyrenia operations. Maybe at a

bad moment, when his death would have set their cause back good and hard. Mawzi covered up his death and they substituted this man."

"But you can't just find a man who looks like Hadid at a moment's notice."

"In this event they could. Hadid's father had a lot of children and not all by the same woman. This could be a brother, or a half-brother. The family likeness has always been strong. And the rest of the children were always well in the background because Hadid was the one chosen to carry on the cause when the father went."

"But there's the woman, his wife . . . why should she take part in this?"

"She was very much in love with Hadid, sir. He gave her everything she had; taught her everything she knew almost, and she devoted herself to his cause. When he was killed, she'd want his work to go on . . . At least, she'd begin that way, though I've a feeling her fervour has worn off. In my opinion these three now are very much at odds with one another."

"It's plausible," said Sir George. "And it could be a nasty shock to a lot of people in Cyrenia. What do you feel about it, Neil?"

"On a snap judgment, sir, I'm inclined to agree with Major Richmond's theory. I see no point in the deception if the real Hadid is alive. I remember, too, that about two years ago the Cyrenian National Army was pretty hard pressed and Mawzi and Hadid went underground for quite a while. The switch could have happened then and they went to earth while the new Hadid was groomed for his future role."

"Maybe you're right. Well, what do we do? Let Whitehall know and wait for their reactions?"

Grayson nodded. "I'll go down to the *Dunoon*, sir. We can send a cipher message through the Admiralty. I'll make out the message and only Teddy Burrows need know . . ."

THE PLACE they had moved to from the cave was a patch of acacia trees half-way up the side of the crater. The trees formed a barrier in front of a cleft in the rocks that ran back about twelve feet and was

entirely in shadow. At midday Roper went down to Plevsky with food and drink. When he came back Walter Mietus asked him about the girl.

Roper shrugged his shoulders. "She's in some pain with her leg and a little delirious. Why are you keeping her?"

"I want to check the plan of the fort with her. These local people will know the place inside out."

Roper lowered himself to a patch of loose shale at the side of the cleft and settled his back against the rock. He pulled out a packet of cigarettes and tossed one to Mietus. They smoked in silence for a while. Deeper in the cleft Sifal slept and Lorentzen lay at his side, his hands under his head, staring out at the green canopy of acacia leaves. The whole group were relaxed and unconcerned.

Roper said, "That bastard would have blown us to hell—I wonder why?"

Mietus looked up from the sub-machine-gun he was cleaning and stripping.

"He was her brother, I think. From what Mawzi said about the soldier we killed I should say this was the girl." He finished assembling the gun and put it down by his pack. "I'm going to the top," he said.

Up on the lip of the crater Mietus found a place in the rocks from which he could look down on Mora and Fort Sebastian. He put his glasses to his eyes and watched the *Dunoon*. A few local rowing boats were moving round it. A liberty boat pulled away from the destroyer towards the jetty. The white tops of the sailors' hats were spread over the boat like aspirin tablets . . . A shore leave party, Mietus guessed. He swung the glasses up the slope to the fort. There was some movement in the courtyard and he picked out the lorry and the jeep. On the parapet he found Colonel Mawzi and Hadid Chebir standing by the awning. Much farther round to the left was the open square of Ardino, the pink walled church catching the sun.

Tomorrow, he thought, they would go down to the beach at Ardino. Max Dondon would be there with the flying-boat . . . They'd pull away from the beach in one of the fishing boats (he must check with the

girl about that) and then they would be off and all this affair over . . .

He lay there for a long while, watching Mora and the fort. The sun had begun to drop towards the sea when he finally moved and made his way down into the crater. He went to the cave and not the acacias.

Plevsky was sitting well inside the cave out of the sun. The girl was propped against some loose stones and rubble. She was conscious and her eyes stayed on Mietus as he came into the shadows.

He squatted by Plevsky and pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket.

"She has been conscious for long?" he asked in German.

"An hour."

"Does she talk?"

"No. I have no Spanish, but I have tried her with a little English. She says nothing. She is just a simple, stupid girl. And very frightened."

"So simple she would have enjoyed watching us all blown to hell."

"We killed her lover, no?"

"It could not be helped."

Mietus moved up closer to Arianna. Her face was dirty and cut, and she had her right hand on her ankle, leaning a little forward. Her leg was swollen and mottled; she would be in pain.

Talking in Spanish, Mietus said very deliberately, "Listen to me carefully. Who we are and what we do here is not for your understanding. One thing only matters. Do you wish to live?" Arianna made no answer. For a moment her eyes went from him to Torlo's sack-covered body at the cave mouth. When her eyes met his again they were narrowed by bitterness.

Mietus's hand came up quickly and slapped her across the left cheek.

"You understand my words. Answer."

The tears gathered in her eyes. "Yes," she said, "I wish to live."

"You shall if you answer my questions. To some of the questions I know the answers so you will be unwise to try and deceive me. How many boats will there be on the beach at Ardino at ten o'clock tomorrow morning?"

"Four."

"Is there one which will take ten people?"

"Yes."

Mietus put the paper he held on her lap.

"You know Fort Sebastian?"

"Yes."

"This is a drawing of it. I shall point out the rooms and the various places and you will tell me if I have them right."

Mietus edged closer to her and took a pencil from the breast pocket of his leather jacket.

"There are many things about the fort I do not know," said Arianna.

"What you know, you will tell me."

"And how will I know that I will live?"

"I say you shall. Now, watch—" The pencil touched the paper; "—here is the main gate. It has a little door cut into it?"

"It has."

"Inside there is a room to the right or left?"

"There is a big room to the left. To the right is a little place with a telephone."

Plevsky listened to them; question and answer, question and answer, and when it was all done he knew that the girl would die. She should have been dead already, but Mietus had missed her. So now, he took advantage of that fact. Mietus took advantage of everything. He was a machine . . . perfect. It was a pity about the girl. For hours he had watched her and he had remembered many things about the girl he had known far back in Poland. . . .

Mietus went on with his questioning and the girl's voice came back, as thin as a reed, trembling against a river current. Finally Mietus stood up and tucked the paper into his breast pocket.

Plevsky said, "She has been useful."

"Yes."

"That is good. And now?"

"It is not safe for both of us to walk together in the open. Give me ten minutes, and then follow. Finish her before you leave. Here." He handed Plevsky his revolver with the silencer screwed to its barrel. Plevsky handed him his own revolver in exchange.

From inside the cave he watched Mietus move into the open, pass rapidly and quietly into the scrub and disappear. Plevsky looked at his



watch. Behind him he heard the sound of the girl crying. Her distress puzzled him. Either she cried because she knew she was going to die or because she thought she was going to live.

He went in to her and shifted his grip on the revolver so that he held it by the barrel. Her face was still in her hands as he stood above her. He reached down and hit her expertly with the flat of the revolver butt against the side of her head just above the left ear. She dropped back loosely against the pile of stone rubble.

He looked at his watch, standing very still and not thinking about anything except the jerking little second hand of the watch. When the time was up he raised the revolver and fired two shots into the soft earth face at the back of the cave.

IN THE Bell Tower Marion stood at the window. All day the thing had been clouded in her mind. But now it was abruptly clear. At last, she knew what she must do. Outside in the warm darkness were men . . . a body of humanity suddenly very near to her. And above them all was John Richmond whom she loved. All day she had argued with herself and all day, deep in her heart she had known this moment must come. She was going to betray Mawzi and the false Hadid . . . even if by doing so she could well betray herself—and all she longed to save . . . One life could not be balanced against another. The only wisdom lay in preventing the immediate disaster. After that one could only pray for a miracle.

She turned away from the window. All she had to do was to unlock her door, go to the tower door and call softly to the guard and tell him

to fetch Major Richmond. When he came into her room the thing would be gone beyond her control.

She went to her door and felt in her dress pocket for the clumsy key. She opened the door and the light from the room behind her fell across the dark stairs. Someone moved out of the darkness into the light. It was Colonel Mawzi. He said nothing and in the silence she heard a soft scuffle from lower down the steps. Abou, like a polite genie, came into the light too, and stood with his head a little bowed, his eyes avoiding her. Marion knew then that one or both of these men had been waiting out here ever since she had retired to her room.

Colonel Mawzi put out a hand and took her arm.

"This is an anxious night for us all," he said gently. "It is better that we should spend it together." He moved, not pulling her, and she went with him, dumbly and blankly.

"Put out the light, Abou," Mawzi said.

As they moved up the stairs to Hadid's room, Marion heard the click of the wall switch from her room and then the soft scuffle of Abou's bare feet behind her.

In his room Hadid was lying fully dressed on his bed. He looked up at them and said with almost boyish glee, "Only a few more hours."

DAPHNE WAS IN the small cabin on the *Dunoon* which Marion Chebir had used during her voyage to San Borodon. She smiled to herself because she had talked her father into letting her come to Mora. It had been a surprise for Neil . . . she had felt his deep tremor of happiness . . . and she could never have lived these three days without seeing him A little later, when Teddy came in, she was in her dressing-gown, creaming her face. The moment he entered she knew he was still restless and preoccupied. He'd been like it all day. He wandered round the cabin now and finally sat down and pulled out his cigarette case.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"You know I don't, darling."

Her back was to him. She heard the click of his lighter. She turned and looked at him steadily.

"Come on, Teddy," she said easily. "Out with it. Something's on your mind. What is it—something gone wrong?"

He didn't answer. He pulled at his chin with his blunt fingers and the familiar movement roused a swift affection in her. Years ago she had loved him, so she thought, in the way she now loved Neil . . . but somehow the thing had been lost. She had a sudden spasm of guilt at the thought that very soon now she would have to tell him about Neil. It would wound him terribly.

"Daphne . . ." he said and then cleared his throat and hesitated. "I've been thinking. Maybe I made a mistake in staying on in the Navy."

"But you love the Navy."

"In a way. But I love you more." He looked away from her as he spoke. "I've been thinking—why don't I chuck the whole thing up? Go back to London. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Why do you bring this up now?"

"Oh, I don't know. A chap gets to thinking about things. Seeing things clearly . . . from other people's points of view . . ."

She wasn't deceived by the casualness he tried to put in his voice. Every instinct in her was awakened. Outwardly very calm, she turned away from him and bent towards the mirror. Inwardly she knew without doubt that somehow he must suspect something about Neil and herself. There was a tremble of nervousness in her fingers as she patted her face. He must know something. This talk of London and leaving the Navy . . .

"You'd like it," he repeated. "Enjoy it myself, too. Small house somewhere in Kensington, and me toddling off to the City. Always have looked well in a bowler and pin-striped trousers." He laughed and the sound stirred a great tenderness for him in her. Oh, Teddy dear, she thought; it's all too late and hopeless.

"Yes, I'd like it," she said.

"Might even have some small place in the country . . ."

If it weren't for Neil, she thought, this would be what I want. Just for a moment—because she hated the thought of ever having to wound Teddy—she wished there never had been a Neil, and then as quickly

killed the thought. She wanted to tell Teddy the truth. But she couldn't at this moment.

She turned and, seeing him sitting bulky and awkward, she went quickly to him and put her hands on his shoulder. She bent and kissed him. God forgive me, she thought; and she hated herself for the unhappiness which she carried for him.

"It's a lovely idea," she said. "But you sleep on it. After all——"

"But it's what you want, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course."

He stood up, slipping an arm round her.

"Then I'll get it fixed as soon as I can. Nothing to stop us that I can see. Can you?"

She shook her head, unable to say anything.

When he was gone she stood staring miserably at the curtained port-hole. How can I tell him, she thought? How can I?

IN MORA, Andrews and Grogan were drunk. They were drunk like ships in good ballast, settled and riding steadily. They talked reasonably, though now and again a word became wild, slippery and untamed, but both of them ignored the rebellion in the other out of good drinking manners. A bottle of *fundador* was on the table before them, but each of them had already bought a spare bottle of brandy, which had been thrust awkwardly into a pocket. They knew that bars had a habit late at night of disappearing, that a man could find himself stretched in the bilge and rain water of a beached boat and only his own resources to provide him with a drink. Both of them knew, too, that the liberty boat would pull away from the jetty at midnight, and that it would go without them.

One of their leave party came across to the table and muttered something about time to be getting back.

Grogan looked at him with a glassy stare, and Andrews with a pleasant and dangerous dignity said, "The history of your family, I should say, is of considerable interest. You want me to tell it to you? Geneal . . . genealogico . . ."

The other sailor smiled and said knowingly, "Ho, ho—like that, is

it. One of these days you'll choke on one of them dirty great words " Andrews began to get to his feet.

Grogan put out a hand and pulled him down. "Let me," he said.

The sailor wisely disappeared before Grogan could stand up.

To console themselves, the two filled their glasses again from the bottle.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AN HOUR after darkness Mietus and his party left the acacia trees. In a long-intervalled single file they went up from the crater and bore right-handed round the crest until they were directly above the narrow spine of the ridge that ran down to Mora and Fort Sebastian.

Without any words between them Sifal unshipped the radio transmitter from his back and set it up on a bare plateau of rock. The other four melted into the darkness, forming a protective screen for him.

An hour later Sifal said quietly, "The reception was good. Max will be off Ardino at ten tomorrow morning."

"Good," said Mietus, and there was silence.

After a time he began to speak and there was an odd paternal note in his voice as though he were almost tender in his concern for the men with him, but none of them was deceived by it for they knew that his real affection and tenderness was for the thing itself. This love was professional and his anger against a false move could be fierce and cruel.

"The sun rises," he said quietly, "at five-fifteen. We shall go inside at four forty-five. We shall leave here at four. Lorentzen and Sifal, you take the men in the guard-room. No shooting unless it's absolutely necessary. Use a knife if you've got to kill. Plevsky and Roper—you go straight across to the men's dormitory. Hold them there and get their arms. I shall go straight to the Bell Tower. If I cannot get the guard with a knife, my shot should be the first alarm . . ." His voice, quiet and unemotional, ran on, giving explicit instructions, an even murmur of sound against the warm, dark night, and as he spoke he could see it

all happening, living his words with a visual keenness that painted faces on the men in the fort below whom he had never seen.

"Remember," he said, "the Governor must not be harmed. Remember, too, one quick death will show we mean business. The whole thing is simple and we shall have the advantage of surprise, but remember that nothing is certain. There is always some fool eager for a hero's death . . . Any questions?"

"The guard on duty just inside the small door?" asked Roper.

"I shall deal with him as we go in."

"All light switches are on the right inside the doors?" It was Lorentzen. "All?"

"Yes."

There were no more questions. They settled back against the rocks. Below them distantly, the chalky lights of an excursion lorry probed snail-like up the hill from Mora on the road to Ardino. As it passed at its nearest point to them they could hear very faintly the sound of men and women singing.

In the lorry drunk, roisterous, in love with the whole world, and ready to fight the whole world if it said a word out of place, were Grogan and Andrews. Neither of them was quite clear how he came to be in a lorry. One moment, they had been drinking in the bar and the next out in the street, staggering arm in arm and then suddenly surrounded by laughing men and women who had come to Mora for the day to watch the arrival of the *Dunoon* and the Governor . . . and now here they were swaying and lurching over the rough road to Ardino, adrift on a great euphoric wave. Well, they could make a night of it at the *Bar Filis*

ARIANNA was adrift, too. She was the creature now of shock, of pain, and of horror. Awakening in the darkness of the cave was no more than the prolongation of a fearful nightmare. She felt the dry earth and stones under her hands and knew where she was. There, just down there, lay Torlo's body and even now she knew a galaxy of flies would be resting on the sack that covered him.

She pulled herself forward on her hands and knees and began to crawl

towards Torlo. Her right ankle and foot flopped painfully against the ground, and her head throbbed and throbbed. She moved and whimpered to herself like some maimed, fear-dazed animal.

The men had gone. They had killed Torlo and they thought they had killed her. She squatted back on one flank and felt the wound on her head.

Maybe she would die, too.

She ran her hand over the sack and pulled it away from Torlo. In the darkness her hands went over him. It was as though he slept heavily and she shook him roughly and said his name in a stupid mixture of understanding and not-understanding. Then, following swiftly, came the clarity of knowing he was dead. All right. Then she herself would kill the men who had killed Torlo and had killed March. She would drag herself all over the island until she found them and killed them. Her hands, still on the stiff body, felt the bulge of the two spare hand-grenades in his pocket and she pulled them out and began to crawl with a feverish haste out of the cave, but her pace soon slackened as the rough stones and rocks cut into her elbows and knees, and she stopped, panting and suddenly sensible.

She dropped the two grenades into the front of her dress. Sitting up she tore strips from her underskirt and bound them round her knees. She worked with a slow, competent assurance, talking gently to herself. Her hands she left bare, they were hard and strong.

When she was ready she began to crawl towards the path that led out of the crater. She went slowly, instinctively conserving her strength. Every little while the pain from her leg and the throb, throb from her head built up into a sobbing of breath in her lungs and she had to collapse flat against the earth and wait for fresh strength to return to her. But each time she lay on the ground she could feel the hard pressure of the two grenades against her soft breasts, and each time she remembered March out in the fishing boat with them the day he had brought the grenades and taught them how to use them.

She eventually reached the top of the crater at twenty minutes past four. By that time Mietus and his party were on their way down to Fort Sebastian.

IN FORT SEBASTIAN Sir George Cator was asleep. By his bedside was a copy of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. He was dreaming that he was taking a trip with Captain Nemo in the *Nautilus* and through the great plate glass window of the submarine's saloon they were watching a couple of coelacanths at clumsy play. He made little puppy noises of pleasure in his sleep.

Richmond was asleep, too. Soundlessly, dreamlessly. On his table the luminous dial of his wrist-watch shone palely, the faint light just touching the black shape of the revolver which hung on the wall at the side of his bed.

Neil Grayson lay awake, thinking of Daphne. As soon as it was daylight, he told himself, he'd walk down to Mora. There'd be a fisherman about who would take him out to the *Dunoon*. By now there might be a reply to his message to London about Hadid Chebir. All this, he knew, was really an excuse . . . he would stay aboard ship and have breakfast with Daphne. There was an impatience in him to see her, to hear her voice.

In his room Sergeant Benson was snoring lustily. The fort cat, an over-fed tawny-coloured creature with one cropped ear, was curled in a ball at the foot of his camp-bed.

In the next room Jenkins the cook was sleeping, too; he was dreaming with a fine smile on his face for he was at the village flower show and quite clearly no one else was going to come near him so far as chrysanthemums were concerned—best six blooms, any variety.

The darkness in the men's dormitory was lively with snores as they all slept.

Up on the parapet by the Bell Tower, the guard lit himself a cigarette and smoked openly, standing his rifle against the parapet.

Down at the main gate Corporal Hardcastle, Guard Commander for the night, was standing with his back to the gate. Above the black bulk of the dragon tree he caught the red glow of the guard's cigarette, wondered for a moment whether he would go up and brass him off and then gave up the idea and lit a cigarette himself.

In the guard-room three men, fully dressed, lay dozing on their camp-beds.

In the Bell Tower Colonel Mawzi turned away from the open window and looked at his wrist-watch.

"In ten minutes," he said quietly, "they should be coming in."

Marion, sitting on the end of the bed, shivered suddenly. She felt helpless and sick.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TWO HUNDRED yards from the end of the long ridge down from La Caldera, Mietus stopped. He turned away right-handed, dropping off the ridge through a tangle of low cactus palm and poinsettia bushes. The others followed him like phantoms.

They hit the road from Mora to the fort fifty yards from the main gate. Mietus crossed the road and waited, beckoning to the others to close up on him. He stood at the foot of one of the poles that carried the telephone lines from the fort to Mora. He looked at Sifal and then crouched. Sifal stepped on his shoulders, put out a hand to the pole to steady himself, and Mietus rose. Twelve feet above, Sifal's hand found the twin signal cables. He cut them with his knife and the ends dropped with a faint whip of sound into the roadside bushes.

They moved on in single file to the main gate. A row of stones on each side of the gate had been whitewashed for the Governor. The air was thick with the scent of jasmine that grew in a tangled bush against the wall.

Mietus stood close to the wooden gate and Lorentzen came to his side. Key in his left hand Lorentzen felt for the lock on the small door. His fingers found the round boss and slowly and carefully he fitted the key. It turned in the well-oiled lock. Lorentzen eased the door open an inch and stood back. For a moment Mietus paused and looked back at the men behind him. He could feel the cold, anonymous bitterness hard inside him as it always was at such moments.

With a long, controlled movement of his right hand which held also his knife he swung the door open. A weak bulb burnt high up in the lofty vault of the gate arch. Corporal Hardcastle was standing directly

underneath it, his back to Mietus. He died without fear or even a black moment of surprise. Mietus stepped up behind him and his right hand drove in a low arc so that the knife plunged diagonally upward under the left shoulder blade and found his heart. There was a faint whistle of protesting breath from Hardcastle and he fell, dead almost before he reached the ground.

Without a look at the others behind him Mietus stepped over the body and disappeared into the gloom of the courtyard, circling quickly round the shrub and flower bed.

Roper and Plevsky followed him out of the gate arch and went quickly towards the men's dormitory on the far side of the courtyard.

Lorentzen and Sifal moved towards the partly open door of the gate-room. They paused listening. No sound came from within. Lorentzen stepped into the room and his right hand went up for a second from the stock of his gun to flick on the switch. The three men lay in shirt and trousers on their beds, their rifles against the wall behind each bed. Dirty tea mugs stood in a row on a small table. Over the middle bed was a coloured photograph of Marilyn Monroe.

A man, roused by the light, sat up, gaping in surprise. Sifal slid past Lorentzen and put the muzzle of his gun a foot from the man's face. Lorentzen took a step forward and kicked the other two beds. Slowly the men came up from their sleep, sitting up, and then one began to half roll from his bed. The movement was stopped by Lorentzen as he swept his gun in a short arc and said in English: "No noise! Get up and come out. The first one to be stupid gets this."

The men, now fully awake, slid off their beds and stood, fearfully, afraid to make any movement lest it be the wrong one.

"You first——" Lorentzen nodded at the man by the bed nearest the door. "Then you. Then you." He stepped back through the door and as the men moved into the courtyard one by one Sifal moved round behind them.

"Across to the dormitory," said Lorentzen. "Keep in a bunch." The muzzle of his gun swung across them. On the ground before them was the body of Corporal Hardcastle. The dullness went from their faces. Their lips were tight, their face muscles hardened and Lorentzen knew

that this was the dangerous moment. When a man sees his own dead, the fear in him stays but something comes up alongside it and the balance between obedience and revolt trembles delicately. Slowly, bunched together, the men began to move across the courtyard.

Meanwhile Roper and Plevsky had reached the dormitory. They went in and Plevsky switched on the light. There were only five men in the room. For a moment nothing happened and Roper, standing by the arms rack just inside the door, looked down the room and felt the flick of distant nostalgia. Once he had been in this Army and lived in such a barrack-room . . .

Somebody jerked up in bed and shouted angrily, "Put out that light!" And then sat, rubbing his eyes and staring. Other men came awake, grumbling and muttering; then taking in Roper and Sifal and the slow arc drawn by their sub-machine-guns, were suddenly, curiously quiet.

"Keep quiet and stay where you are," said Roper evenly.

"Who the hell——"

Plevsky's feet shuffled with the quickness of a ballet dancer and the man who had spoken was silent, open mouthed, as the gun-muzzle rose and steadied a foot from his eyes.

"That's better," said Roper. "Now sit up on your beds and put your hands behind the back of your heads. Be sensible and you won't be hurt."

From the open doorway behind them came the noise of the gate guard. They came into the room and Roper and Plevsky drew apart as the men moved down the aisle between the beds.

"Sit on the ends of the beds and put your hands up like the others." Roper spoke as he backed towards the door, and then half over his shoulder he said to Lorentzen: "All yours now. Take the bolts out of the rifles in the rack and toss them out of the window."

Leaving Lorentzen and Sifal in the room he backed out into the courtyard with Plevsky.

CIRCLING left-handed round the courtyard Mietus was hidden from the steps leading to the Bell Tower parapet by the shrubs and the dark mass of the dragon tree. When he came clear of the shrubs and tree he

paused, looking upward. The sky was paling rapidly now and he could see the silhouette of parapet and Bell Tower. The long slope of the stone steps was in dark shadow. There was no sign of the guard at the top.

He crossed to the steps and began to climb them. When his head was level with the top step he saw the guard. The man was leaning with his back against the Bell Tower door, legs crossed and smoking. His rifle rested against the tower wall. He was staring straight at the tops of the steps.

Mietus looked down into the courtyard. Everything was in hand down there. He came up two more steps but as he raised his foot to the third the guard saw him. The cigarette was jerked quickly away and the man bent for his rifle. Mietus came quickly up two more steps, and now almost on the parapet level he fired from the hip.

The noise, brief but fierce, burst across the night wickedly. Every wall and parapet threw back the angry echoes and the courtyard caught the sound and slammed it from wall to wall.

The guard fell backward against the Bell Tower door and his rifle clattered across the flag stones.

Mietus ran to him. Crouching at his side he began to search for the door key. He found it in his left trouser-pocket and as his hand came free with it he could feel the warm tackiness of fresh blood on his fingers.

Neil Grayson, no sleep in him, had slipped out of bed and dressed. When the shots broke out he was half-way down the stairs from the long mess-room to the courtyard, feeling his way in the darkness. His whole body jerked with the sound and for a moment he felt his heart pound with shock. He waited, but when no sound followed, he moved on angrily, imagining some fool of a guard who had loosed off in carelessness.

He pushed open the door to the courtyard and stepped out. As he did so he saw the lights from the inner windows of the men's dormitory and two men, caught in a triangular patch of light from the open door. He skirted round the shrub bed towards them.

"What's happened?" he called.

The men halted in their movement along the wall. Their heads came

round and the light from the barrack-room slashed across their faces. Their faces were strange to Grayson, and he had a swift premonition of disaster. He saw an arm move upward and instinctively he flung himself sideways.

A burst of .450 bullets whistled past and smashed against the wall behind him. He crashed into the bushes of the little garden, rolled over and, pulling himself up, plunged for the cover of the dragon tree. Its smooth grey elephant-hide trunk glimmered palely in the growing light. He flung his right arm across the trunk to swing himself round and into cover. But as he did so the sub-machine-gun roared behind him again. The shock of the bullets whipped sideways across his body, beating and pulping into his back. Great bark chips spurted from the smooth trunk in front of his face. He gave a long, moaning scream and dropped heavily, sliding downward, his face rasping on the tree.

Plevsky ran to him, looked and turned away, sprinting through the bushes to rejoin Roper outside the door of Sergeant Benson's room.

The door opened as he reached Roper. The light in the room was on and Sergeant Benson stood on the threshold. Seeing the two strangers full in the light from behind him he raised his service revolver. But Roper, whose right hand had left his gun to reach for the door, slashed with the edge of his palm at Benson's wrist. The revolver dropped to the ground. Plevsky's gun muzzle was thrust into Benson's stomach. Then Roper said "You were lucky my hand wasn't on my gun. Walk along to the dormitory, and don't try any tricks."

A yard to their right the door of Jenkins's room opened and he came out, rubbing the top of his head.



"What the hell's going on here? Anyone would think it was Guy Fawkes night . . ."

His back was to the three and before he could turn Plevsky and Roper had drawn back, pushing Benson ahead of them. Benson put out a hand and took Jenkins by the shoulder. The cook swung round, startled.

"Serg. What's—"

He broke off, seeing the two men behind Sergeant Benson.

"All right, Cookie," said Benson grimly. "Keep your hair on. There's trouble behind us and we've got to behave."

THE FIRST burst of shots from Mictus wakened John Richmond. He was sitting up and grabbing for the lamp almost before he knew what had brought him out of sleep. There was silence now but the noise of the shots echoed in his brain. He slid out of bed and pulled his trousers on quickly over his pyjamas and then, as he reached for his revolver, there came another quick burst of shots.

He raced for the door and as he went through he heard someone scream. He ran down to the bedroom where Sir George Cator slept. The door opened and Sir George stood against the light.

"What the devil, Richmond—"

"Stay where you are, sir."

He motioned the Governor back into his room and ran on down the corridor. He could feel the pounding of an angry alarm in him. The shots had come from a quick firing sub-machine-gun. A Thompson, he guessed: the only thing like it they had in the fort were a couple of Sten-guns which hadn't even been issued to the guard.

At the end of the corridor, just before the entry to the long mess-room, the steps to the parapet went up left-handed. He took them two at a time and flung open the wooden door at the top. To his left, just turning the corner from the Bell Tower section of parapet walk, he saw four men running towards him. The first one was a stranger, but the three behind were Mawzi, Hadid Chebir and Abou. He saw the leading man holding a sub-machine-gun and the others with revolvers in their hands. John fired at the leading man and stone chips kicked from the parapet at his side. Immediately the four dispersed, flinging themselves into the

deep embrasures that were cut like small pulpits into the parapet wall.

John drew back against the angle of the stair door and called sharply, "Stay where you are, Mawzi. I'll drop the first one that moves."

For answer the stranger rose boldly from his cover and the machine-gun blasted. The heavy bullets splattered up the far side of the door and wood and stone chips flew from the wall. John felt them bite into his face and hands. He drew back, slammed the door and pushed the bolt over. As he did so the sub-machine-gun was fired again and the bullets smashed through the wood angrily. He heard them beat and whine in the dark vaults of the stairs and one seared across the side of his neck like a red hot poker. The shock of the blow threw him off his feet and he fell backward down the stairs.

For a second or two he lay winded and helpless. Then as he struggled up, groping for the revolver which had fallen from his hand, the door at the head of the stairs crashed open.

Momentarily he saw the stranger, pale fair hair haloed against the dawning light, and Mawzi's dark face behind him, saw the raised Thompson gun and then heard Mawzi shout almost desperately—

"Alive! Alive!"

With a shout Mietus leaped the drop of the four steps and thudded into John like a battering ram. They went over, rolling and struggling together across the corridor and slamming through the door of the long mess-room. Falling to its lower level they were for a moment separated. John struggled to his knees, saw the stranger rising also and drove his right fist hard into the taut, vigorous face. Mietus's head went back. Rising farther, John struck again. The sub-machine-gun was on the ground a foot beyond the man. He jumped sideways reaching for it; but as he bent, his head turning into the mess-room, his eyes found a pair of feet just beyond the gun. Something hit him a crashing blow on the side of the head and he went down into darkness.

Spitting and shaking his head, Mietus pulled himself to his feet. John lay still on the ground. Beyond him stood Roper, the machine-gun in his hand still reversed, the stock raised as he stood over John. Plevsky slipped by them into the corridor and saw Mawzi half-way down the stairs.

"It's all right," said Plevsky. "He's out. Everything's O.K. below."
"Get the Governor. You and Roper."

Mawzi turned back up the stairs. Standing outside the door, on the parapet, was Hadid Chebir with Abou. The light was strengthening fast now and the long ridge of La Caldera was clear right up to the crest.

"He's settled?" Hadid Chebir asked.

"Yes. The fort's ours. Nothing can stop us now."

"Nothing" Hadid drew himself up, his face flushed with exultation. "This day Cyrenia finds her full strength."

Mawzi nodded slowly. "And the name of Hadid Chebir will live for ever, as only the memory of a martyr can. But a new leader, not a blown-up pig's bladder, will drive Cyrenia forward."

For the briefest moment, so brief that it was hardly enough to bring full recognition of the final insult and threat, Hadid looked questioningly at Mawzi.

Deliberately Mawzi raised his revolver and shot the man through the heart.

He looked down at him coldly for a moment and then, turning to Abou, said, "It is a pity that Major Richmond's only shot should have killed him."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ABOU FINISHED dressing the flesh wound on the side of John's neck and handed him a glass of brandy. John, dazed and still thick in the head, drank and shuddered as the spirit bit into his throat. Silently Abou collected his clothes and laid them on the bed.

"Dress," said Colonel Mawzi from the door. He stood there, a short, alert figure, bantam-fresh and full of confidence, his arms folded across his chest and one hand holding a revolver.

Colonel Mawzi watched John not without sympathy. He, too, had known the sickness of defeat. This man was a soldier, a commander, and all disaster in his command became personal to him. That was the way a good officer always felt.

He said, "A boat party has just begun to pull away from the *Dunoon*. It would be stupid for it to come up here. Two men could hold this place for days. Also, I imagine, neither of us wants any more casualties."

John, pulling on his jacket, spoke for the first time.

"What are the casualties?"

"Your guard commander, the guard on the Bell Tower and Sir George Cator's A.D.C."

John's face tightened angrily.

"Is Sir George all right?"

Colonel Mawzi nodded. "He is a prisoner in the mess-room. The rest of your men are under guard. You need not be ashamed of this . . . Surprise is hard to beat."

"What do you want from me?"

"You will go down to the *Dunoon* with a message to her commander. He must recall his men to the *Dunoon*, and his ship must remain at anchor until midday. You will, of course, return here after delivering the message."

"The *Dunoon's* guns could blow this fort to pieces."

"True." Mawzi came a step into the room, leaving the door free for John to pass. "But at the first salvo I will shoot every one of your men in the barrack-room. At the second the same thing would happen to yourself and Sir George. I am quite serious about this. Let us go up to the parapet and you will see why."

Out in the corridor sunlight streamed down through the bullet scarred entrance at the top of the steps. Loose wood and stone chips grated under John's feet as he climbed the stairs. Lying a few yards from the doorway, huddled against the grey parapet wall was the body of Hadid Chebir. John stopped, staring.

From behind him Mawzi spoke quietly.

"I have had my casualties, too, Major Richmond. A serious one. Hadid Chebir is dead. But he goes back to Cyrenia in triumph. Sir George goes with us, too."

Without turning John asked, "How was he killed?"

Mawzi came alongside him. "You ask? It was the first shot from your revolver."

John's eyes came up from the body to Mawzi. "You know that's a lie, Colonel Mawzi. My first and only shot went wide and hit the parapet."

Mawzi shrugged. "Did it? Abou saw Hadid die by your shot. So did I."

John looked at the revolver in Mawzi's hand. It was a German Mauser. His own revolver was a Service pistol .38. He understood very clearly what had happened. Mawzi was to be the new leader in Cyrenia. But he would have the power of Hadid's martyrdom behind him. He said coldly, "Make sure you get him back to Cyrenia, Colonel Mawzi. Make sure no one can ever prove that the bullet inside him came from your weapon. Even your people, I imagine, wouldn't take kindly to a manufactured martyr."

Mawzi smiled and made a little motion with his revolver towards the courtyard steps by the Bell Tower. "You can take the jeep," he said. "I am sure you will return. But if you should be tempted to stay I shall shoot three of your men."

John moved along the parapet towards the steps. As he neared them he saw Marion Chebir standing close to them. For a moment their eyes met. He saw the fatigue and distress on her face and then a sudden, half-closing movement of her eyes, as though she would have shut them against this morning. And John, without bitterness, but with a heavy confusion, thought: this is the woman I love, who loves me and yet stands on the other side of this disaster. Ignoring Mawzi behind him, he said, "You knew this was going to happen?"

Marion nodded. "There was nothing I could do."

Momentarily the impulse was with him to loose some of the anger that turned inside him against her. One word from her would have kept Grayson and John's two soldiers alive. Then, forcing down his emotion, he told himself fiercely that if the word had not come from her there must have been a reason stronger than herself for it.

Behind him Mawzi said, "Hurry, Major Richmond."

He went down the steps to the courtyard. In a broken swathe of shrubs he saw Grayson's body lying close to the smooth trunk of the dragon tree. This was the end of all Grayson's ambitions. He'd planned and worked, and now this . . . Four feet up the smooth grey trunk, the

wood was mangled and smashed from the impact of bullets and a thick, glutinous welling of red sap had run from it in a broad smear, and still ran He went on to the jeep.

Under the gate vault, a tall man with a small head pulled aside the body of the guard commander and began to open the main gates.

Mawzi said, "Turn that boat party back and see that Commander Burrows makes no mistake about my message. When you return leave the jeep outside the gate and come in with your hands above your head and keep them there until you have been searched."

John drove down the dusty hill to Mora and just before he reached the water front met Lieutenant Imray with half a dozen armed ratings. He drew up and Imray came to him.

"What the devil's happened up there?"

"Everything. Send word to Aldobran to keep his people in their houses till midday. Then take your men back to their boat. All of them. I've got to see Burrows."

IN THE PINES at Ardino where Arianna and March used to meet, Grogan and Andrews were drunkenly asleep. They snored and muttered and a half-full brandy bottle, tilted on the pine needles, caught the sun in a great diamond on its shoulder. Grogan moved restlessly in his sleep. Something was digging into his right side and he turned over to his left. After a few moments something began to dig into his left side and he twisted over again. After a time he sat up, half-opened his eyes and then shut them quickly against the blaze of the sun. Cautiously he partly opened his eyes again and squinted around him, one hand on his forehead, and swayed. He saw Andrews lying close to him, stared at him stupidly for a while and then he groaned and said, "Oh, Gawd . . . Oh Gawd . . ." and flopped to the pine needles and lay on his back breathing heavily.

"AND THAT'S IT." John stood up and poured himself a glass of water from the carafe by Burrows's bed. "Mawzi holds all the cards and if you make a wrong move it will put Sir George and my men in the soup."

Burrows was silent. He sat on the side of his bed in his cabin and frowned

"And what do you think he's going to do—before midday?" he growled suddenly.

"Clear out. He'll take Sir George with him, and Hadid's body."

"How's he going to do that?"

"By air, I imagine. Flying-boat. His men must have come that way."

Burrows stood up. "I could blow that place right off the cliff."

"But you won't."

"What happens to you?"

"God knows. I'm the man who's supposed to have killed Hadid. The Cyrenians will expect an answer to that one. The point is, however, until he's actually off the island we might get a break."

"Damn! Damn! Damn!" Burrows beat his fist into his palm. "I'll send a signal through to the Admiralty, but a fat lot of good that will do. Why in God's name do they send people like that out here with only a handful of men to look after them? You can tell that clever bastard I'll sit here until midday and watch him take my father-in-law off to Cyrenia. How's the old man taking it?"

"I haven't seen him yet."

"I can't see the Admiralty telling me to go in. They won't risk anything happening to Sir George. Poor old Grayson . . . what a way to go." He made a sudden angry, frustrated noise in his throat. "Sorry——" He looked sharply at John. "You're the one who's really in a spot. Isn't there a thing I can do?"

"Nothing. Just sit tight. And don't worry about me."

"Could be he'll take you back to Cyrenia. The Government will do a deal for you and Sir George."

John pursed his lips wryly. Mawzi would never take him back. Compared with Sir George he was small beer as a hostage. He knew exactly what would happen. Mawzi hated him. But there was no room in his mind at the moment for thoughts about himself . . . They'd come later, nearer the time. Now he was only bitterly aware of the whole muddle and his self-anger. . . . He'd made a mess of things. The responsibility for this was squarely on his shoulders.

He turned towards the cabin door. "I'm going." Burrows nodded and for an instant he put his hand on John's arm.

COMING BACK from seeing John off, Teddy Burrows found Daphne in his cabin. She stood against his small sea-desk, a flowered dressing-gown belted loosely round her, her pale fair hair alive with the sunlight that came through the port-hole. "Teddy," she said, "what's going on?"

"There's trouble at the fort," he said awkwardly, knowing that there was no escaping the truth, full of clumsiness because he had no way of handling this gently. "Mawzi's taken it over. He had help from outside. But your father's all right, and will be . . ."

"But the shots? Has anyone——"

She came forward quickly. Her face was lifted to him, anxious and so dear to him that he knew that if it had been in his power to change things for her he would. . . . He would have had Grayson alive, have faced anything rather than see her God in heaven, what a mess!

"Two guards have been killed," he said thickly, "and Neil Grayson . . ." He held her hand, looking down at it, not wanting to see her face, for her sake and his sake. He heard the sharp passage of her breath and then the cabin was silent. There seemed no movement or sound for a long time, and then very slowly her hand escaped his and held the stuff of his sleeve and her body was lightly against the bulk of his body and his arm went out and round her shoulders, drawing her closer and holding her. He felt her shake with a sudden spasm and he held her tighter.

"It's all right," he said. "It's all right . . ." The words were clumsy, no real meaning in them. But the tenderness in him was an agony as she trembled and her voice came muffled and faint.

"Oh, Teddy Oh, Teddy . . ."

"Take it easy, old girl" His hand came up and held her face against his breast. Everything would be all right . . . Against his hand that cupped her cheek he felt the touch of her tears and the love in him for her was a great strength and calmness so that the words he had used suddenly had a real truth and he knew that from now on everything would be all right because they would both make it so.

JOHN RICHMOND got out of the jeep and walked towards the fort with his hands above his head. Mietus and Colonel Mawzi waited for him inside. Mietus ran his hands over him.

"Well, Major Richmond?" Mawzi asked.

"Lieutenant-Commander Burrows will remain at anchor until midday."

"Good." Mawzi looked at his watch. It was nine o'clock. He waved his hand towards the courtyard. "The mess-room."

John went up the courtyard steps to the room and the two followed. A guard stood outside the door and opened it for them. Mietus came in last and closed the door, covering them with his carbine.

Sir George, fully dressed now, stood by one of the windows overlooking Mora. He turned. Seeing the bandage round John's neck he said:

"You all right, Richmond?"

"Yes, sir."

"A mess, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

Colonel Mawzi came forward.

"We leave here in half an hour, Sir George. The *Dunoon* will remain at anchor until midday. We shall be miles away by then. I do not have to stress that any foolishness will only cause trouble."

"Yes, yes . . ." said Sir George. "We know all about that." He sounded testy and impatient. He came by John, gave him an almost paternal pat on the arm and facing Mawzi, said, "Nobody's going to be foolish. We don't want any more deaths."

Mawzi took out his cigarette holder and firmed a cigarette into the socket. He nodded approvingly. "You are a sensible man, Sir George. I shall try and make your stay in Cyrenia as comfortable as possible."

"I don't care a damn about that, Mawzi. It could be that your stay there won't be a very comfortable one. All the cards aren't in your hands, you know. Not by a long chalk."

"What do you mean?" Mawzi lowered his cigarette and frowned.

John stepped forward. He knew what was in Sir George's mind. "I think, sir," he said quickly, "that it might be wise——"

"Nonsense. Why shouldn't he have something to worry about?" Sir George jerked his head towards Mawzi, an ugly, turtle-like thrust. "The Hadid Chebir here is not the real one. My Government have been informed of this, and the moment they hear that you are taking me back to Cyrenia they'll spread the news that the Cyrenian National Army is being led by an impostor . . ."

Mawzi said quietly, "The thing you don't appreciate, Sir George, is that Hadid Chebir is not going back to Cyrenia. Not alive, anyway."

"He's dead?"

"Yes, Sir George. Major Richmond will tell you how he died. We shall take his body back. That is all we need. It will be buried and any false stories your Government circulate will be regarded by my people as the childish lies of a Great Power which has been humiliated. Nobody will believe you or your Government and Hadid's body will never be examined by anyone."

"What is this, Richmond?" Sir George looked at John.

"Hadid is dead, sir. Colonel Mawzi claims I shot him. I did nothing of the kind. My belief is that Colonel Mawzi shot him himself. He means to be the new leader in Cyrenia . . ."

"That is true," said Mawzi calmly. "I shall be the new leader; but the memory and martyrdom of Hadid will be the strongest weapon in my hand. The matter of a hero's death, Sir George, is a question of timing. Two years ago when the real Hadid was killed our cause was in a bad way. His death then, had it been known, would have finished us, dispirited our tired supporters. So we substituted a half-brother of Hadid's. But now—at this moment of triumph for us, and humiliation for you—his death is superb. Nothing that is said against him will be believed. I think all the worries, Sir George, are still on your side." He turned and walked towards the door.

When he was gone Sir George dropped to a chair and ran a hand wearily over his face.

"I didn't know he was dead . . . They told me about our losses, but not that." He looked up at John thoughtfully, "What he says is right. No one would believe a word of our story."

"No . . . not once they're back in Cyrenia. But if we could prevent

it; if we could keep Hadid's body and get the bullet from it . . . and if we had Mawzi, and" John shrugged as his words tailed away. There were so many "ifs" and "ands."

IN THE COTTAGE at Ardino Arianna lay in a feverish delirium. Her mother sat by the bed. Occasionally the old woman wiped the girl's face with a damp cloth and held a glass of water to her lips. Arianna stirred and now and again talked mutteringly. The room was close and dark. Outside the sun beat down on the hard, dusty square.

There was the hollow beat of footsteps on the stairs and Ercolo of the *Bar Filis* came into the room. Unshaven and bleary-eyed he stood over the bed.

"She is still the same?" he asked quietly.

"The same. She talks wildly and I think of Torlo. If it is from a fall she is like this, he may have fallen, too."

"A couple of men have gone up to look for him. It is easy to follow the way she crawled. It is lucky the two sailors found her in the pine trees behind the bar . . . She could have lain there and died."

The old woman crossed herself.

Ercolo shook his head to get the drink from him and thought of the two sailors who had come staggering back into the bar just after sunrise, shouting something about a girl . . . reeling about the place wildly and finally pulling himself and the fisherman out and up the hill. The sailors had been no help in carrying her. They had fallen all over the place, laughing and singing.

"They have gone, the sailors?" asked the old woman.

"Yes"

"The Holy Mother must have sent them. But it is of Torlo that I think. Even a goat can slip on La Caldera."

Ercolo put a hand on her shoulder.

"They will find him and she will be well again."

He turned and left the room.

The old woman wiped Arianna's face again. The blood ran a little from the cut above the girl's ear and smeared the side of her face as the cloth slid over her smooth cheek.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE BACK of the fort's lorry was open, though the arched hoops that carried the canopy were still in place. The body of Hadid Chebir, wrapped in blankets, was already lying on the floor boards.

Marion Chebir stood near by, her coat close round her shoulders as though she were cold, her eyes looking through the main gate towards the dusty road down to Mora.

John and Sir George Cator came into the courtyard followed by Mietus and Colonel Mawzi. Sir George, seeing the body of Neil Grayson, bit his lower lip, and his face grew grim.

Behind them Mawzi said, "Major Richmond—go to the barrack-room. Tell your sergeant we're leaving. No man is to leave this fort until twelve."

They swung across the yard and Plevsky at the barrack-room door unlocked it at a word from Mawzi.

John called, "Sergeant Benson!"

The sergeant came forward to the door. Over his head John could see the other men in the room. They were very still and watchful.

Sergeant Benson said, "Sir?"

"Sergeant, Colonel Mawzi is taking us away. When we're gone, no one is to leave this fort until midday."

"Yes, sir." And then as Plevsky put his hand to the door, Benson went on quickly, "Sorry about this, sir. They were too quick for us."

"It's all right, Sergeant."

Benson stepped back as the door closed on him and Plevsky turned the key. Then Plevsky followed the others on to the lorry.

There were two bench seats, one on either side, at the back of the lorry. Sir George and John sat close up against the cab. Marion took her place on the bench opposite them but a little lower down and Abou sat at her side. He was thinking that it was good that his friend Jenkins still lived. Near the tail-board Plevsky and Mietus stood holding on to the rear awning stay. Sifal sat on the floor boards, his back against the

tail-board, his feet drawn up and away from the blanket-wrapped length of Chebir's body. His sub-machine-gun rested across his hunched knees covering the inside of the lorry. In the cab Roper was at the wheel, and with him were Lorentzen and Colonel Mawzi.

The lorry moved across the yard, under the shadowed archway and out into the sunlit space before the fort.

Sir George, holding to the bench with one hand to stop his body swaying, was wishing he was twenty years younger, which meant quicker and stronger. In an affair like this there was always a delicate balance between success and failure. And sometimes a chance came to upset the balance. Back in the mess-room, when they had been left alone, he had said to Richmond: "If you get a chance, go for it. Don't worry about me." But for the life of him he could not see where any chance was to be given. As the lorry curved down the hill the *Dunoon* came into sight and he saw the movement of men aboard her. Teddy Burrows must be watching this, fuming with impatience. Teddy He was a big, clumsy man, but the kind Daphne needed Oh, she was a bit disappointed in him, he guessed, because he'd stuck to the Navy. But she'd grow out of that and find that Teddy was the right man. Funny, he'd imagined lately that she'd begun to take a little more interest in Grayson than he would have wished. Maybe that was why Grayson had decided to leave him . . . one of the reasons, anyway. Poor Neil

The lorry rattled into Mora, and John saw people watching from the windows and doorways. They were curiously still and unreal, like puppets in some miniature toy town. The lorry went by the church and there was a sudden grey and white flurry from the pigeons on the baroque façade, and John thought wryly of the doves at Sorby Place. He had dreamed of taking Marion to Sorby Place . . . a dream was all it would ever be. His eyes dropped from following the flight of the pigeons and he found her looking at him. She made no attempt to avoid his gaze and he looked full at her, knowing that there was never going to be any time for them to sort things out and come to the truth . . . but he went on looking because even though he was not sure of her he had no doubt about his own love. Across the few feet that separated

them he spoke to her in his thoughts, crying out to her that he didn't care a damn what she had done or what was to be for him or for her because nothing mattered except that he had found her if only for a brief moment.

The lorry changed gear to take the rise up the valley. The banana and vine terraces streamed by them and a pale cloud of dust trailed along the road behind them. They went sharp right at the Ardino turning and the road became steeper.

And then, across the lorry, his eyes still on her, John saw Marion's face slowly move to new life. It was almost as though she had heard his thoughts, knew his feelings and had been waiting for them. Her head turned slightly towards Abou on her right and then back to him. So slow was the movement that it might have been brought about by the cant of the lorry as it took the steep rise. Then her head went left and for a moment her eyes were off him and glancing downward to her arm. As clearly as though she had spoken he knew she was drawing his attention to something. Very gradually he saw her left hand slide out of her coat pocket. For a moment it was fully exposed, the movement masked by her body from Abou and the men at the end of the lorry, and then as slowly her hand slid back into the pocket. She had shown him the butt of a revolver.

He felt his heart leap and, scared of his face giving him away he raised his hands to his eyes and rubbed at them. When he opened his eyes Marion was gazing over the tail-board of the lorry. John brought his head round and found Sir George's eyes on him. There was the merest shadow of a nod from the Governor and John knew that he had seen, too. There was little hope, he knew, of Marion being able to pass the revolver to him. But she would be waiting for the moment when he decided to take a chance and would be ready to cover him. And Sir George, too, would be waiting.

He looked now with new interest at the guards. His only hope was to have one of the tommy-guns they carried loose in their hands. It would mean a jump and snatch and a prayer that his moment of surprise would beat the movement of a trigger finger. And there would have to be cover close at hand to protect him. He shut his eyes and

pictured the beach at Ardino as the lorry whined in low gear down the hill towards the town. He opened his eyes quickly as Abou gave a small cry and pointed up over the right-hand edge of the cab. John twisted round. Out over the sea at about a thousand feet a flying-boat was coming round in a great sweep.

The road levelled out between low oaks and widely spaced pines, and a few moments later they were in the deserted Ardino square. The lorry ran right across it, past the church and pulled up with its nose under the trees that flanked the beginning of the small path that led down the cliff to the beach.

Mietus and Plevsky jumped down and lowered the tail-board. Sifal stood up and covered John and Sir George with his gun. Marion climbed down and then Sifal motioned to Sir George and John to follow. They were joined by the side of the lorry by the three from the cab.

"Roper and Plevsky, you carry the body." Mawzi's voice was brisk, self-possessed. He gave his orders to the rest, impersonally, briefly, the whole movement long worked out in his mind. The flying-boat was waiting and beyond it Cyrenia. His blood stirred with the thought . . .

Standing a little apart from the rest Marion said to him, "What is happening to Major Richmond?"

Mawzi's eyes travelled from her to John and he smiled.

"Only Sir George comes with us. We shall say good-bye to Major Richmond on the beach."

John knew what kind of good-bye was intended for him.

The party started off. Lorentzen went first with Sir George close behind him. Then followed Sifal with John after him. Behind John came Mietus with Marion almost at his side. After them came Roper and Plevsky carrying the body, and Colonel Mawzi and Abou formed the tail of the file.

John watched Sifal ahead of him. The Arab was carrying his gun loosely under his right arm. The back of his head was close shaven and John could see the sweat on the walnut skin.

They came to the cliff top and the beach was spread below them. A few boats were pulled just above the high water mark. A quarter of

a mile out the flying-boat taxed slowly against the wind and tide drift, keeping station in line with the beach.

There was only one place and one hope, John had decided. The path twisted steeply down to the beach. To one side, where it met the sand, the dark cliffs curved round and broke back in a cleft that was almost half-vaulted over by rocks that had fallen from higher up. In front of the cleft was a long barrier of black rock about three feet high embedded in the dry sand. If they could make the cleft, the rock barrier would give them cover. If they could make the cleft, and if they had arms they could possibly hold out for some time It was a flimsy chance, so flimsy that he half drew back from any thought of making the attempt. One burst and both Marion and Sir George would go A cold muscular shiver ran through him.

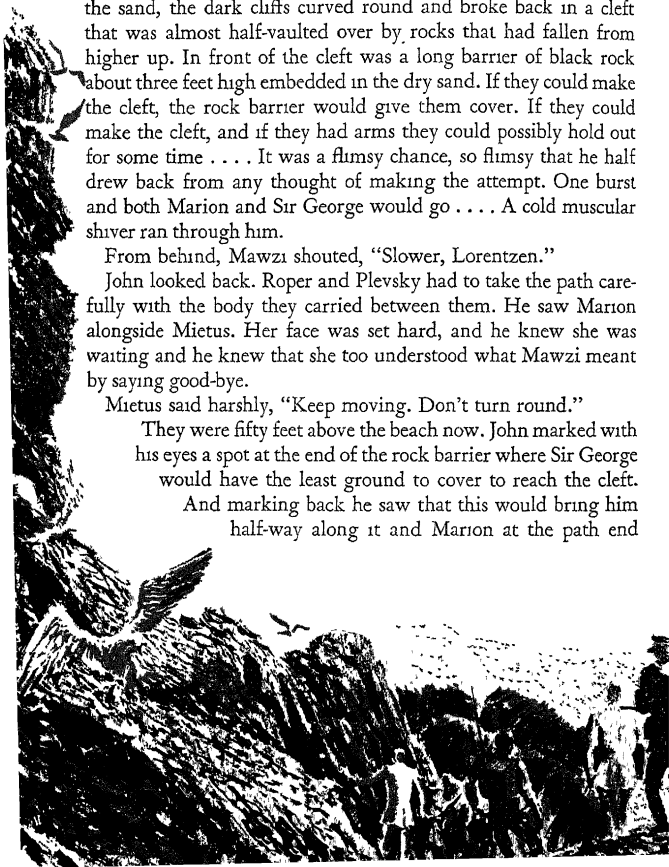
From behind, Mawzi shouted, "Slower, Lorentzen."

John looked back. Roper and Plevsky had to take the path carefully with the body they carried between them. He saw Marion alongside Mietus. Her face was set hard, and he knew she was waiting and he knew that she too understood what Mawzi meant by saying good-bye.

Mietus said harshly, "Keep moving. Don't turn round."

They were fifty feet above the beach now. John marked with his eyes a spot at the end of the rock barrier where Sir George would have the least ground to cover to reach the cleft.

And marking back he saw that this would bring him half-way along it and Marion at the path end



of it. She had a revolver, but she would have the farthest to run

The loose stones gritted and rolled under his feet. The palms of his hands were sweating and he rubbed them slowly across his tunic, drying them, knowing that when he grabbed for Sifal's gun there must be no slipping. A great black and yellow-tailed butterfly flipped erratically across the path and he saw Sir George's head turn slightly to watch it.

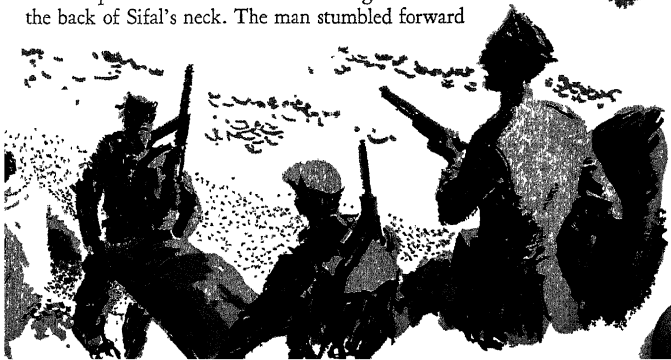
Lorentzen jumped clear of the path on to the beach. He began to plough awkwardly across the loose black sand, walking parallel to the black ridge of rock that fronted the cleft. Sir George followed him, his white jacket edges flapping a little in the sea breeze. John saw that the Governor had closed up a little on Lorentzen and suddenly he knew that if he didn't take the chance then Sir George would.

Sifal ahead of him jumped to the beach. John jumped too, gaining a foot on him and ploughed forward shortening the distance between them. Over Sifal's shoulder he watched Sir George and waited for the short, white-coated figure to come abreast of the spot he had marked. Four more steps

Three His feet slipped in the sand as he thrust forward.

Two The sweat was thick on his palms again and he wiped them down the side of his trousers and, as his arms came up from the movement, he shouted fiercely: "Now!"

He leaped forward and smashed his right fist hard down on the back of Sifal's neck. The man stumbled forward



and, as he did so, John grabbed at his gun and jerked it free. Sifal rolled over on the sand in front of him, rolling and rolling desperately.

The sub-machine-gun came into John's hands, bolt ready cocked. He brought it round, and his finger found the trigger. He fired at the rolling body, saw it leap and quiver, stopped firing and saw Sir George ahead of him, crouched on his hands and knees in the sand. The Governor had jumped for Lorentzen and missed him.

Lorentzen, half-turned, had his gun pointing down at the Governor.

John fired, running sideways towards the rock barrier.

The cliffs echoed with vicious sound and he saw Lorentzen double up, then fall backward spread-eagled to the sand.

"Into the cliffs," shouted John. He jumped for the rough sides of the low rock barrier and, as he did so, he saw the long file behind him, straggling across the beach and part-way up the path. For a moment the whole scene seemed caught in slow motion. Roper and Plevsky had dropped the body and were in the act of straightening up. Mawzi and Abou were behind them trying to pass. On the beach Mietus stood with his gun thrust forward slightly. Marion was swinging towards the man. Mietus fired. A row of stone chips flashed across the rock a foot in front of John.

Marion's hand came out of her pocket and, as the echo of rapid-firing shots died; there was the echo of a solitary shot. Mietus dropped his gun and his hands went to his side as he sank to the sand.

For a few seconds before he died Mietus saw them very clearly and very calmly. Sir George had picked up Lorentzen's gun and was climbing over the rock barrier towards the cleft. The British Major was on top of the barrier, firing up at the path, covering the girl as she stumbled across the sand and round the end of the rock barrier towards the cleft. The picture wavered a little, became misted and then was lost in a red blur, and as he went he was telling himself that this was what he had always known . . . one day out of the blue, out of the . . . blue

Moving backward towards the cleft in the rocks, John blazed away at the four men on the path, seeing them fling themselves down for

cover and from the tail of his eye watching Marion's stumbling run across the sand to the cleft.

Someone leaped from behind one rock to another at the foot of the path and a sub-machine chattered and a great fan of stone chips and sand spurted between John and Marion. John fired at random, forcing the man to take cover, and jumping from the rock, catching Marion by the arm and half-running with her, half-pulling her, scrambled for the cleft. They flung themselves forward into the shadow and dropped to the ground. Against the high vault of the cleft where the loose rocks were piled came the sudden scream and whip of bullets and pieces of stones showered down on to them.

John lay for a second or two with his arm over Marion's shoulder, feeling the stones thud against his body. Then from his side he heard the answering chatter of the Governor's sub-machine-carbine. Sir George was crouched to one side of the cleft just in front of them. A stone chip had cut the old man's face and blood trickled from it.

Another scream and chatter of bullets whipped close overhead. The three of them crouched low and the spent bullets ricocheted among the rocks behind them.

In the following silence Sir George said, "Not too healthy. As you ran in here they came down to the beach and they're over behind that clump of rocks. Four of 'em. They've only got to keep up some covering fire while one of them climbs part-way up the cliff. From anywhere up there the whole of this cleft is open." He put out his old hand, brown-spotted and veined and touched Marion on the arm. "What you did was . . . well, first class. Thank you." Marion smiled. For the first time that day there was something like contentment in her. She looked at John and knew he was feeling it, too. They were together.

John reached for her hand and squeezed it. Then turning to Sir George he said, "Don't fire wildly. We haven't got much ammunition. Keep your eyes on the slope above their rock."

He edged himself forward across the sand and stones until he could get a view round the far end of the rock barrier. Nothing moved on the small sector of beach he could see.

Somebody came alongside him and he knew it was Marion.

"Last night," she said, her voice unsteady and urgent. "I wanted to come and warn you . . . but he guessed, he . . ."

"It's all right." He kept his eyes on the far rock. It was fifty yards away and these guns weren't too accurate at that range.

"All the time I've longed to be with you . . . to let you know . . . and this morning when they carried Hadid's body away they didn't see his revolver . . . It was against the parapet in the shade . . . Mawzi would never have trusted me . . ."

He put out a hand and tightened his fingers round her arm, feeling the shake in her.

"It's all right, I tell you . . . whatever happens, it's all right . . ."

Something moved by the far rocks and once more the bullets streamed into the cleft. This time they were lower and the stone chips hummed like angry wasps about them. There was a short silence and then another burst. John knew what was happening. Mawzi was keeping them down. Under Mawzi's covering fire one of his men would slip up the cliff and the moment their bodies were in view the end would come. John turned his head round and saw Sir George flat on his side, his old face screwed up in tight creases, muttering angrily to himself. Another burst of fire splattered over their heads.

In the silence that followed Sir George pulled himself up a little and said sharply, "Good God—what's that fool doing?"

A wild shout suddenly broke out from up the cliff-side. John looked up. Against the blue sky the staggering silhouette of a man was sharply outlined. He had his arms raised and shouted, wildly and angrily.

Mawzi, Roper, Plevsky and Abou looked up from their shelter and saw him too. Roper was just taking off for the cliff climb that would give him a view of the cleft.

Mawzi raised his gun but even as he did so he saw it. Small and black against the pale blue sky, a tiny, dark ball that soared out and began to drop in a slow arc. Another followed it.

He shouted "Down!"

He flung himself against the base of the rock and saw the others drop too, their actions forced by instinct and years of experience.

Down they came, twisting and turning slowly, the two hand grenades

which Arianna had tucked into the front of her blouse hours before, the two hand grenades which Grogan, full of drink, had noticed and taken charge of when he and Andrews had found her in the pines. And now up on the cliff, wakened from his sleep after straying away from the pines and Andrews, Grogan watched the grenades fall and his mind was still reeling with the after haze of intoxication Old Sir George lying in the sand being buzzed at with tommy-guns . . . ! And the major they'd brought from Gibraltar . . . ! And blokes spread dead on the black sands . . . ! "Aeeeeh!" he cried as the grenades fell.

ON THE SAND below the first grenade exploded and two seconds afterwards the other one burst. The first grenade killed Abou, Roper and Plevsky and the second Colonel Mawzi.

JOHN STOOD up slowly.

"Stay where you are," he said firmly to Sir George and Marion.

His gun at his hip he walked cautiously round the barrier. To his left Sifal, Lorentzen and Mietus lay very still on the sands.

He skirted the rocks by the cliff path and climbed the boulder which had sheltered Mawzi and the others. They lay twisted and still. The air was strong with the smell of explosives.

To his right a figure came half running, half shambling down the cliff path. He watched it curiously. Grogan came running on, shouting, but his words were suddenly lost in a great roar of engines out at sea. The flying-boat was moving swiftly, a blinding white bone of foam at her bows. John saw her lift and slowly gain height and finally bear away to the south and out of sight beyond the far headland.

He turned back towards the cleft. Sir George and Marion had risen. She came slowly round the edge of the rock barrier towards him. As they met she put her arm into his and rested against him and he put his other arm round her holding her very tightly.

Behind him he heard Sir George say sharply to the man from the cliff top, "Who the devil are you, man? Never mind, never mind, you couldn't be more welcome"

John stood there, his arm firm round Marion and the two men's

voices were just a blur of sound . . . and vividly he knew all the trouble and fuss that would stem from this beach . . . the pressmen and the politicians, the inquiries and the high-level decisions, a whole weariness of time and talk . . . but, in the end, it would all pass . . . Everything would pass except this closeness to Marion, this fullness of contact. He looked down at her and she smiled at him.

That evening, as the sun was dropping behind the western flanks of La Caldera, Jenkins came out of his cookhouse carrying a tin of paint, insulating tape and a big ball of putty.

The sap was still running red from the dragon tree. He'd been too busy all day to do anything about it, but now he had a little time to spare. He edged his way through the damaged shrubs, swearing gently at the way they had suffered and stood for a moment before the mangled grey trunk. It was enough to make you weep the way some people carried on, bull-dozing about like a lot of savages . . . Well, there was nothing that could be done about some things, but a tree, now . . . he could heal it so that it would last for another thousand years. A good gardener was worth five hundred soldiers . . . He set to work, swearing and cursing, as his hands moved patiently and skilfully to his task.



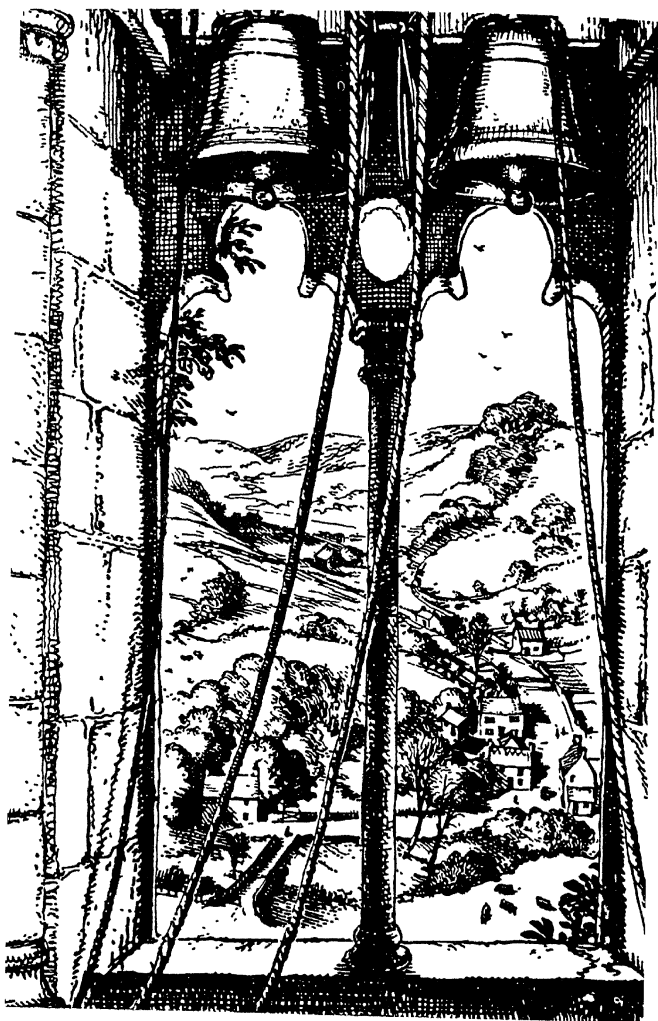


Victor Canning

A BORN story-teller, Victor Canning published his first book at the age of twenty-three. Since then he has specialized in novels of suspense, and is now one of Britain's leading thriller writers. Mr Canning travels widely and, though much of the background in *The Dragon Tree* was in fact suggested by his wartime experiences in the Middle East, he also made a special trip to the Canary Islands in search of local colour.

Several of his best-selling stories, including *The Golden Salamander* and *Venetian Bird*, have appeared on the screen, and he has himself worked as a script-writer in both England and America. The most recent film to be based on a Canning novel is *House of the Seven Hawks*, starring Robert Taylor.

In contrast to the pace and excitement of his stories, Mr Canning's leisure hours are spent playing golf and growing carnations at Brenchley, in Kent, where he lives with his wife and two daughters in a picturesque Elizabethan farm-house.





Trumpets Over Merriford

A condensation of the book by
REGINALD ARKELL

Illustrations by J. S. Goodall

*"Trumpets Over Merriford" is published by
Michael Joseph, London*

FOR CENTURIES the lovely village of Merriford had lain undisturbed in its quiet corner of Wiltshire. When an American Air Force base was established near by the villagers were dismayed, but they never imagined that life in Merriford would be transformed overnight from calm into chaos. In fact, Anglo-American relations in the tiny village became very strained.

The lovable, vague old vicar tried to keep apart from it all. With the problem of raising funds to repair the church tower, he had enough on his hands already.

It would be unfair to reveal here just how it all worked out for the best. But it certainly had something to do with the vicar; with a delightful girl who had her hands full looking after him; a sturdy young American airman; and, of all places, a little town in Texas.

This gay and tender novel is written with the author's customary skill and warm understanding of human nature.

"The charm of it all lies in the author's unfailing gift for transporting the reader to the depths of the countryside."

—*The Daily Telegraph*

"A merry, mellow little tale. . . ."

—*The Scotsman*



SPRING HAD COME to Merriford. Ernie Mutlow's tortoise had woken up; old Mrs. Boulton's Scottie was chasing an early butterfly; and the aconites in the shrubbery at the Vicarage were a fair picture.

You could always tell when spring had come to Merriford by the aconites in the Vicarage shrubbery. Like a yellow carpet they were. It was the leaf mould that did it. The leaves fell from the nut bushes, and, as nobody bothered to sweep them up, the ground became all soft and spongy, like walking on a feather bed. Then, every January, you could see the bended necks of the aconites push through the soft soil. When they straightened up, there were the little yellow flowers with their green ruffs, such as were worn in the days of the first Queen Elizabeth.

Nobody walked through the shrubbery any more; it was too much of a tangle. Thrushes nested in the laurels; and the little grey squirrels had a high old time among the overgrown nut bushes.

But it hadn't always been like that. Fifty years ago, when the new parson brought his young wife, Margaret, to Merriford, the paths were kept clear and the nuts were stored in large earthenware jars to last all the winter, and if the squirrels got more than their fair share they were lucky. The shrubbery was then a sanctuary for the young couple who

took the problems of their new and rather frightening position to its quiet walks. Here they could throw off those restraints that made a parish priest and his young wife seem so different from ordinary people.

One of the odd things about being a country clergyman, they soon discovered, was that you were not supposed to have the same difficulties as your parishioners. Nobody stopped to wonder whether you had trouble with your old kitchen range or had enough money in the bank to pay your bills. They envied you your fine big house, and reckoned you were lucky having to work only one day in the week. In those days, the Vicarage shrubbery had heard many confidences that would have surprised the good people of Merriford.

But that was all a long time ago. Today, looking at the overgrown shrubs you might be tempted to say: "Another old parson lurking behind his evergreens! Old and cranky and past his job. . . . No good to anybody. . . . Trouble is they can't sack him . . . not even his Bishop. . . . No wonder his church is empty!"

TODAY, the Vicar of Merriford, nearing his eightieth year, sat in his study wrestling with *The Times* crossword. But nothing seemed to go right. What could one make, for instance, of "Plant with a kick in it?"

Perhaps Mary could help him. He rang his little handbell and the study door was opened by a pretty young girl carrying a brush and a dustpan. "Mary!" he said. "What is a plant with a kick in it?"

Mary pretended to ponder. But she had never been kicked by a plant. Also, she had to keep an eye on the oven. "Why don't you put it away for now and take a walk in the garden?" she suggested. "If it's a plant you're looking for you'll likely find it there."

"A sensible suggestion," agreed the Reverend. "And that reminds me—who is going to mow the lawns this summer?"

"What's the matter with Joe Huggs?" asked Mary.

"He finds the extra work too much for him," said the Reverend.

"That means the new people up the road have offered him more money. Wait till I see him—I'll give him a piece of my mind."

"I expect he'll keep out of your way," said the Reverend, mildly. "I'm sure I should if I were in his shoes."

Mary was a bit of flotsam who had been washed up, some ten years before, by the fury of the London blitz. A party of small evacuees had arrived in Merriford, carefully labelled and invoiced, and had been placed on chairs in the schoolroom to be chosen by kindly foster-mothers, one for his blue eyes, another for her brown curls. When the blue eyes and brown curls had been collected and carried away, all the little strangers had been accounted for but one. . . .

Her name was Mary, but that seemed to be all she knew about herself. Her family had disappeared in the blitz, leaving no trace. There she sat, looking solemnly at this strange new world—too young to wonder and much too tired to care. So Mary had found a poor sort of home with old Mrs. Dobbin and, as nobody came to claim her, she had passed quietly into the background of village life.

Meanwhile the Vicar's old home had been turning into a domestic nightmare. It was a great barn of a place, with endless stone passages stretching away in a forgotten world of dairies, larders, sculleries and cheese-rooms. Fifty years before, with all the village to draw on for domestic help, the Vicar's wife had been charmed with the large rooms and the enormous lawns outside. But the place was out of all keeping with present conditions. After Margaret's death in an air raid, a dwindling procession of housekeepers and daily women came and went. Some, after looking at the Vicarage, didn't even stop to unpack.

Then the death of old Mrs. Dobbin after the war left Mary free to adopt the Vicar of Merriford, and to become something of a foster-mother in her own right. She hadn't minded scrubbing the stone floors, lighting the fires, doing out the rooms or cooking the meals; but she was beginning to find the Reverend a bit of a handful.

Some cold mornings when she went upstairs to tidy his bedroom, there would be his woollen undervest lying on the floor, and it would take her all her time to persuade him to dress all over again. And so surely as she got the back-kitchen fire going for the Monday wash, so surely would she have to run across the fields to the church for the surplice he had left in the vestry.

And what with choosing the hymns for choir practice or remembering what Sunday it was after Trinity, she had her hands full.

THE REVEREND would have found it difficult to say when the bottom fell out of his little world.

There were the two wars, of course, each marked with a personal disaster—his only son, John, killed in 1918, and Margaret a victim of the second war—but what family had not been stricken? Having written “Thy Will Be Done” on a memorial brass under the west window of his church, the Reverend had returned to the ruins of his family life, and, in the pact he had made with his God, he had found peace.

It was the village that seemed to have suffered most from the war. In the Vicar’s early days, Merriford, situated near the top of the Thames, had been a well-ordered little community in which very little had changed for four hundred years. Each winter the meadows were flooded and so had never seen the plough. In winter, perhaps, it was a little depressing, but with the spring the meadows would be filled with wild flowers, the boundary brook would become a blaze of marsh marigolds, and people would see what God was about when, every year, He sent His floodwaters across Merriford meadows.

Church-going in Merriford had been a pleasant occasion which everybody enjoyed. The girls wore their best frocks and the young fellows went to church to look at the girls. The old Squire sat in the front pew, turning to glare at any small boys who shuffled their feet behind him. After the service the congregation hung round the church gates in groups, discussing village politics.

But now something had gone, and nothing new had come to take its place. The village boys had lost their taste for leadership but they missed their leaders. Perhaps they even missed the discipline of the days when the Parson was really somebody and the old Squire was a power in the land.

So many nice things had gone now. The cricket club hadn’t started again after the war, nor had the flower show or the social club. What had been everybody’s business was now nobody’s business. They all wanted to play cricket and they missed their social club, but no one wanted to do the work.

Of course, thought the Reverend, things would right themselves in time. Some young parson would come along and get them going, as he

himself had done fifty years ago. Yes, some young fellow. At this point in his ruminations the old man always felt a slight tightening at the heart. Was *that* what was wrong with Merriford? Was he getting too old for his work? But surely, being Vicar of a country parish was an old man's job. The country itself was old and set in its habits: all it asked was to drift along, singing the old hymns, believing the old beliefs. The country had no use for earnest young curates. What did they know about life and death, or what to say to some poor soul when the shadow of the dark angel fell across the cottage door?

Meanwhile, congregations were dwindling and it seemed that he would soon have the church to himself. What, he wondered, would one of those young fellows do about that? You couldn't stampede a village into holiness. John Wesley had done it, but he was no Wesley.

One Sunday morning the Reverend addressed a sparse congregation on the advantages of Sunday Observance. "Last night," he said, "I dreamed that one of my parishioners arrived at the gates of heaven and was surprised to find that no arrangements had been made for his reception. He complained to the custodian, who replied, rather fairly, I thought. 'My dear fellow, how can you expect me to recognize you when I haven't seen you in church in the last forty-five years?'"

From which it will be gathered that the Reverend was becoming a bit of a character, one of those rare, ripe country parsons who are not greatly concerned with dogma, who have too much respect for the Almighty to meddle largely in His affairs. He loved every man and woman in Merriford; he hoped he was on the right road to heaven, and the more people he could persuade to join him the better he was pleased.

AND THEN the Americans came to Merriford.

One day, just five years after the Second World War, Reuben Watts burst into the tap-room of the Thatchers Arms. "War hev started all over agen," he announced. "They Americans has landed and has took the old aerodrome."

"Who stuffed 'ee up wi' that rubbish?" a fellow ancient asked.

"I see'd wi' my own eyes. 'Undreds of 'em, scurrying about like emmets, in such coloured shirts and weskits as you never did behold."

Old Reuben was nearly right. A detachment of American engineers had indeed taken over a derelict wartime landing ground, and were converting it into an advanced Air Base to protect the Free World. New wonders descended upon Merriford each day. First came giant bulldozers, followed by fearful mechanical contrivances which dug valleys and dropped hills into them. Whole farms were laid as flat as the fens. Public highways were diverted; a finer road was built, but local landowners were furious. The friendly invaders, full of good intentions, were baffled to find themselves building up a heavy debit of ill will.

Failing to please anybody, they settled down to the job of constructing a three-mile runway with a gusto that seemed to the villagers positively indecent. First to go was Merriford's favourite mushroom field, followed by the hollow tree where the rock pigeons built and the rookery in Long Meadow. Clematis Lane, patronized by courting couples for a hundred years, disappeared in a night.

The passing of Snowstorm Cover, where the old fox had always gone to earth, was the last straw. Suddenly the Cover had become a shambles of broken tree trunks lying about in drunken disarray. If these Americans could do away with a fox cover, surely no one was safe!

Finally the engineers departed, and the little American town they had built by the Air Base was occupied by a different kind of invader. Those pick-and-shovel boys had been rather rough diamonds. But the technical types who followed them were a less alarming breed—though they were the ones who, as a final touch of sacrilege, affixed a red homing light to the spire of Merriford church, which was in a direct line with their runway.

Of course the foreigners continued to drive on the wrong side of the road, and in the bar parlours of inns their talk was of strange, exotic things like home runs. But they behaved like any body of reasonable young men who find themselves fed up, bewildered and fearfully homesick. So things quieted down somewhat; the months slipped by; and the Air Base was completed.

Then the jets began to fly in non-stop from their training base in Texas. Great silver monsters, shining in the moonlight, roared over the

roof-tops. The noise was continuous. No sooner had one machine flattened out to land on the new three-mile runway than another was circling round to take its place in the queue; and all this flying, it seemed, had to be done at night. During the daytime the great "silver bellies" sat quietly behind their barbed wire, but, come evening, engines roared and the earth shook. So, what with the noise and the lack of sleep, the village was in an uproar, and relations between young America and old England were strained.

The worried Base Commander paid a semi-official visit to the Vicarage. In his study the Reverend listened to the sad story of a great and friendly nation misunderstood by the very people it was trying to save. Merriford, the Base Commander said, resembled a sinking ship turning her guns on her would-be rescuers.

"Perhaps they don't want to be rescued," suggested the Reverend. "They may not even know that they are sinking. By the way, *are we sinking?*"

The Base Commander set about convincing this odd old man that America had been forced to organize Britain's defences on a colossal scale. The Reverend was no politician and the situation was beyond him. But this young fellow seemed very sure of his ground. Perhaps Merriford had been a little lacking in the courtesies. "Tell me, my boy," he said, "what have my people been doing?"

"They don't like us. They treat us like interlopers."

"Very discouraging," murmured the Reverend. "But you had similar trouble when you first occupied parts of your own great country and the natives were unwilling to give up their hunting grounds. So they scalped you!"

The American rose stiffly. "I didn't come here to be laughed at," he said.

"My dear fellow," said the old man, "I'm not laughing. I'm trying to help. With the best intentions you have taken over our farms, destroyed our hunting grounds, and made our nights hideous. No doubt we should be grateful; but you must give us time."

"Well," said the Base Commander, "my boys are sick of these dirty looks. All they want is to be home where they belong anyway."

"What do you want me to do?" asked the Reverend.

"Next time you're in your pulpit, padre, why not tell your folk the facts of life. If you're shy, I'll send my chaplain along——"

"And the two of us could make a duet of it?" This picture of two preachers in one pulpit, telling Britain that she was now a poor relation, was too much for the Reverend's sense of humour. He smiled. "I'm afraid that isn't the answer."

"Then what do we do? Sit and wait for a blow-up? Suppose your boys, or my boys, start something."

"SOMETHING" started sooner than anyone expected. July the Fourth, a date not unconnected with American history, opened as a warm, cloudless day. The haymakers laboured under a blazing sun, one thought uppermost in their minds. Come evening, they would seek the cool tap-room of the Thatchers Arms, where the mighty hogshead of midsummer cider was already in position. The animal juices stolen by the hot sunshine would be returned a thousandfold.

To the townsmen, cider is an anaemic, non-alcoholic beverage; but that is not the cider brewed for haymakers in Merriford. Tapping the big sixty-gallon cask at the Thatchers Arms is a tradition and a solemn rite. No man is expected to deliver judgment on the vintage until he has drained his quart pot and placed it bottom-up on the counter. You drain your first quart as a sampler, and a second quart to make sure. Then you settle down to the serious business of drinking.

At the Thatchers Arms the stage was set. There stood the great cider cask flanked by mighty flagons. Along the bar were draped all those thirsty souls who, having endured the heat of the day, were now worthy of their reward.

Zero hour had struck—when, down the lane, heralded by sounds of revelry, came a party of ten American airmen who seemed to have been celebrating something up at the Air Base. They flowed into the bar and clamoured for drinks, having already laid the firm foundations of an evening's merriment. The fat landlord, with a wink at his cronies, filled ten mighty flagons from the cask and deployed them before his guests. "On the house, gentlemen!" he announced.

The young Americans gazed in astonishment, until one, finding his voice, inquired what this concoction might be.

"Cider," said the fat landlord. Upon which, a three-months enlisted airman, third class, told a fully licensed landlord what he could do with his cider.

"Bring me a man's drink," said the airman.

"Cider," the landlord told him, "be a man's drink, but I doubts whether you be man enough to drink it. No, nor your young friends neither!"

Such was the challenge. The haymakers looked at the Americans and the Americans looked, not without apprehension, at the ten massive tankards. Stiffly, as at a ceremonial drill, they grasped the handles—all together, boys, down the hatch!

Washington at Yorktown struck no shrewder blow for national honour than did those ten unknown warriors at the Thatchers Arms. And had they known when to stop all might have been well. But young America, lacking discretion, drank tankard to tankard with those strong villagers who had sweated themselves bone-dry all day. The odds were too heavy, the tankards too deep. But it was good while it lasted, good to drink as man to man, to be accepted by the British farmers as regular guys. Came closing time. Just one more for the road . . . the road . . . but where was the road . . . and whither . . . to whatsoever?

Rough but kindly hands tried to sort out the tangle that had once been ten American airmen, but so surely as they rescued one inert form from the shambles, so inevitably did two other airmen claim him as a brother and draw him back into the quivering heap. At last old Reuben reckoned the only thing to do was to "prop 'em up one agen t'other, give 'em a shove-like, and see what 'appens!"

What happened was a serpentine movement across a field of barley, down the bank of the old canal and into the washpool at Sheepbridge Bottom—singing, singing all the way.

"I HAVE COME," said the Base Commander, "to apologize for last night"

The Reverend blinked. "Did anything happen last night?"

"Ten of my men," explained the Commander, "failed to return to Base. One was found asleep this morning in a barley field. Another was trying to save a comrade from drowning in the old canal. Fortunately for them both the canal has no water in it."

The old man chuckled. "That leaves seven unaccounted for."

"The rest were lying in an abandoned washpool."

"And how are they feeling this morning?"

"Still unconscious—all of them. Is it possible that their drinks had been tampered with?"

"Oh dear me, no!" the Reverend assured him. "Our harvest cider is grand stuff. I wouldn't be too hard on your boys. They behaved very well under the circumstances. Brooks, the landlord, says they dropped in just as he was broaching the big cask. They jollied him about grown men and soft drinks. Brooks explained that our cider is a man's drink—if a man is man enough to drink it."

"That put them in a spot, I guess," said the commander. "So they stood up to be counted?"

"They certainly did. So long as they could stand."

SUMMER HAD elbowed spring out of the Vicarage garden. Just outside the back door, Mary had hung a large carpet on the line and was beating the bejabbers out of it with a clothes-prop as big as herself. It took a bit of handling.

Round the corner drifted an American airman who leaned against an apple-tree, smiling at the unequal conflict.

"Sister," he said, "what's the poor thing done to make you treat it so rough?"

Mary laid off the carpet and turned on the intruder. "Who are you?" she asked. "Another of those Americans?"

"How did you guess?" asked the boy.

"No mistaking your noisy lot. Last Saturday night you were terrible. We could all hear you. Shouting and singing."

"Crooning!" corrected the airman. "Just a bunch of orphans, crooning to keep from crying our eyes out. You were never an orphan."

"There's where you're wrong," said Mary. "Orphans don't have to

act daft. Now run along and leave me in peace. I've got work to do."

"Can I come round tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," said Mary. "I'll be washing the surplices."

"Okay. See you Thursday then?"

"Thursday is choir practice."

"Lady," said the boy, sadly, "you work too hard. I'll get the union to picket this dump."

"You are a one," said Mary, amused at his persistence.

"Tell me your name," he said.

"Mary. What's yours?"

"Johnny Fedora," replied the American. "It is a sort of

nickname I picked up because my father owns a haberdashery store in Dallas. When I come round on Friday I'll tell you about it."

Mary smiled. "That's the day I do out the Reverend's study."

Johnny Fedora finally went off singing to the world that it was a beautiful morning. For the first time for months he felt there might be something to be said for Collective Defence and better Anglo-American relations.

Next morning, bright and early, he walked through the Vicarage orchard, but, early as it was, Mary was already on top of a ladder trying to persuade the climbing yellow roses to stick to the south wall of the Vicarage. She was so wrapped up in her job that she didn't know she had a visitor. Down below Johnny looked at Mary perched among



the flowers and thought that never before had he seen anyone so lovely. "Hey, there!" he called, tapping one of her legs to get her attention.

Startled, Mary turned and lost her balance and both she and Johnny landed on the ground in a heap.

"It's you again!" exclaimed Mary. "Now look what you've done."

"Honey chile," Johnny whispered, lying as flat as a pancake, "thank your lucky stars I was there to catch you. Tell the folk back home I died happy." He closed his eyes and gave a good imitation of a dead hero.

HE WAS BACK that same night with a peace offering.

Mary had seen nylons in shop windows, but she had never actually handled them. If Johnny wanted to get into her good books he had finally made the right start.

But there is something about nylons that makes some girls want to look round the next corner of a man's mind. And Mary knew that to Merriford sheer stockings were little less than a symbol of shame.

Still, nylons were nylons. . . .

Johnny followed this tug of war between a lady and her conscience. "Don't you like them?" he asked.

"They're beautiful. But they must have cost an awful lot."

"At home," said Johnny, "these things grow on trees."

"In that case I suppose it's all right," said Mary.

The first item on Johnny's schedule was to give those nylons an airing. How about a movie tomorrow night?

Tomorrow! Why, tomorrow there were the petunias to be planted, the Reverend's supper to be got ready, and the lawn to be mown.

Johnny looked at this slip of a girl with those large, lovely eyes—and those nice legs. "But, honey, don't you ever have time off for fun?"

"There's a lot to be done," Mary said, "and no one to do it but me."

"Okay," said Johnny, "I'll help you with the mowing."

THE VICARAGE garden was becoming a real problem.

The trouble with the country is that everything happens at the same time. When grass is growing on the lawns it is also growing in the

meadows. When a man is needed in the garden, two men are needed on the farm; and the farm comes first.

So the jungle of the countryside was creeping into the gardens of Merriford Vicarage, and only Mary stood between the Reverend and complete extinction.

And then came Johnny.

Poor Johnny! The grass was long and the old mowing machine was as obstinate as a mule. After two hours he had managed to nibble away a bit of lawn no bigger than the vestry floor. And did his back ache!

Gardens! Johnny thought, watching Mary among the bindweed in the borders. Is life so lacking in troubles that anyone can afford to plant a little hell upon his very doorstep?

Left to herself, Nature arranges for flowers to grow where they give the best results and cause the least trouble: moon daisy in the meadow, ragged robin by the brook. But along comes the gardener, deep in his own conceit, and proceeds to improve upon the carefully considered schedule of the Almighty by crowding His flowers into unhealthy reservations where they are at the mercy of every known pest. . . . And when some sturdy plant manages to stand upon its own feet the gardener calls it a weed and will have none of it.

And yet, when the sun started dropping and you caught the scent of the honeysuckle, there might be something to be said for all this nonsense—if only that girl would stop *working* for a minute.

But there was no need to make such hard work of the lawn. Next night, the Reverend was startled by the outcry of a mechanical contraption which laughed at long grass and hurled itself at molehills. Johnny had borrowed it from the Base gardener; but unfortunately he didn't know how to stop the thing. The more he operated its mysterious gadgets the faster the wheels went round, until he found himself flying behind a juggernaut, his feet barely touching the ground, while the Vicarage lawn began to resemble a rather haphazard crew cut.

The Reverend stood on the lawn while round him roared the cyclonic disturbance directed by Johnny.

Most gardeners the Reverend had known were all too ready to lean upon their spades, whereas this admirable young man would not even

pause to pass the time of day. Splendid fellow! If only there were more like him.

And then, luckily, the petrol gave out and the machine stopped. The Reverend and Mary approached warily, and Johnny tried to look like Paul Revere at the end of his famous ride.

"An excellent contrivance," said the Reverend, administering a benedictory pat to the infernal machine. "Give the young man a cup of tea, Mary; he looks a little warm after his hard work."

MERRIFORD CHURCH is strangely placed in the middle of a field half a mile from the village. Back in the Middle Ages when the Black

Death ravaged England, the original hamlet of Merriford had been almost wiped out, and the survivors, led by their parish priest, had wisely established themselves on slightly higher ground—leaving the church standing in the field. It is not a large church, and Shelley never wrote an ode to its ethereal spire. And yet, on a drowsy Sunday evening in summertime, when its bells are calling across the flat meadows . . .

There has always been magic in the bells of Merriford. For almost a thousand years bells have rung out from the old tower; crisply on a winter morning, softly on a summer evening, they have sent their cheerful challenge or their mild benediction



across the quiet countryside. And many who have never known the inside of their parish church have paused for one healing moment to listen to the message of the bells.

At times when the Vicar of Merriford felt the need to buttress his belief in his ministry he took some comfort from this message of the bells. The authority of a parish church cannot be entirely gauged by the number of occupied pews. Who can doubt the evangelistic influence of church bells heard on a summer evening across the quiet meadows of the Vale?

Then, soon after the Americans had fixed their warning light to the church tower, the sergeant who had supervised this job met the Vicar in the village. He asked him if he had been up into his belfry lately. "You Britishers," said the sergeant, "like things *old*, but those bells have been there too long for the timber to carry their weight. Better get someone to give them a look."

"Dear me," said the Reverend. "Don't tell me the timbers . . ."

"Eaten up with dry rot," the sergeant assured him. "Those bells of yours are liable to fall any minute."

The Reverend communicated with the diocesan architect, who, in due course, issued a report and prepared an estimate for the replacement of the old timbers by a metal frame. Some assistance might be expected from the diocese, but the bulk of the money must be raised in the parish and surrounding areas.

The Reverend decided to close the belfry at once and to call a church meeting. He realized that his parishioners would be with him to a man, but he had no illusions as to their finances. Where the money was to come from was a mystery.

Six parishioners were present at the church meeting, including Mary; Mrs. Gossop, who was the parish busybody and mixed virtue and venom in varying degrees; the vergers; and three churchwardens. The Vicar explained the extent of the disaster. Then, after mentioning a figure which made one of the churchwardens whistle, he invited suggestions. None was forthcoming.

Then Mrs. Gossop rose.

They must all, she said, sympathize with their beloved Vicar in his

difficulties. But this was no time for mincing words: the needs of the parish came before personal considerations. This matter of the church bells was merely a *symptom*. How had things been allowed to come to such a pass? One had only to read the printed notice above the collection box to learn that the timbers in the belfry had been in position for two hundred years. Their beloved Vicar had served them well over a long period of years. Was it unfriendly to suggest that he should enjoy the fruits of his labours now in quiet retirement, leaving some younger man to grapple with the difficult problems facing the parish?

"Are you moving a resolution?" asked the Reverend, mildly.

"No," replied Mrs. Gossop. "I merely wish to clear the air for any future discussion."

"Kind of you," said the old man.

Only the Reverend had made sense of Mrs. Gossop's rigmarole. Mary had a vague idea that Mrs. G. was up to her tricks again; the churchwardens reckoned she was just talking for the sake of talking; and the verger was asleep. But the Vicar of Merriford sensed the challenge. "Get Out—This Means You!" Mrs. Gossop's poison would sink in.

JOHNNY FEDORA was discovering a funny thing about gardening: it grew on you. You started off hating every minute of it, but once you had worked the aches out of your back you almost got to like it. Even mowing the lawn, on a summer evening, had something to be said for it—a pleasant rhythm followed by a quiet sense of achievement. Before Johnny had been in the garden a week, he had learned to love a lawn.

Nothing, of course, to do with this girl with the large eyes and the urchin crop of hair who had no time for fun. Johnny was still capable of persuading himself that he loved a garden for a garden's sake.

The only trouble was that the Reverend got caught up in the prevailing enthusiasm for better and brighter lawns and borders. He would come wandering out of his study when he should have been preparing next Sunday's sermons—"like an old bumble-bee," Johnny thought—and three people, even in the large Vicarage garden, were as large a crowd as three people have always been.

One evening the Reverend passed Johnny and went on to where Mary

was dismantling the derelict herbaceous border. "Mary," he asked, "how much are we paying that young fellow from the aerodrome?"

"Nothing," said Mary.

"Why not?" asked the Reverend.

"Because he isn't worth it," said Mary.

"Then you must tell him not to come again."

"What's wrong with him working for nothing if he wants to?"

"It places us under an obligation," explained the Reverend. "After all, a labourer is worthy of his hire."

"Not this labourer," Mary assured him.

The old man smiled. It seemed the lady did protest too much. "Very well, Mary," he said. "I will speak to the young man myself."

"If the poor fellow thinks he's helping, why not let him go on thinking? And he's company—of a sort."

"We can't have any misunderstanding," said the Reverend.

Johnny saw that the "old bumble-bee" was coming towards him.

"Tell me," said the Reverend, "what is it about a garden that appeals to you? One doesn't, as a rule, find young fellows of your age bothering about flowers."

Johnny raised his eyes as though calling on the angels to bear witness. "It's the *quiet*. After all that talk, talk, talk up at the Base!"

The Reverend smiled. "Don't let my little housekeeper intrude on your meditations," he said.

"Oh, *her*," sniffed Johnny.

THE BELLS of Merriford had been silent for a month and no steps had been taken to set them ringing again, apart from an appeal to stray visitors, in the Vicar's shaky handwriting, posted on the church notice-board next to a list of ladies responsible for altar flowers.

Twenty times a day the Reverend asked himself where the money was to come from; and long, sleepless hours found him pondering the same problem. It was one thing to hold a garden fête for the organ fund, but how did one set about raising a large capital sum? Fifty years ago, one would have called at half a dozen big houses for the money; but the big houses and the big benefactors didn't exist any more.

The Reverend was at his wits' end. The silence of his church bells condemned him as an old man no longer equal to his trust. Perhaps Mrs. Gossop had been right.

But even running away had its problems. What would be said of a soldier who resigned his commission in face of an emergency? It seemed you would be wrong whatever you did.

And what would happen to Mary? In a year or two, she would be old enough to marry some nice young fellow; but if they had to leave the Vicarage now she would drift into domestic service with strangers, with none of the status she enjoyed as "the Vicar's little housekeeper"—and that would be the end of her.

As for himself, the Reverend closed his eyes and wondered what life without Merriford would mean for him. People thought of retirement as a grateful laying aside of burdens. How wrong they were! He would have to go to Cheltenham or Bath to join those other old men who pottered up and down the promenade, filling in the unprofitable hours over a cup of coffee or the shelves of a lending library. Until strange men wheeled him away to the municipal crematorium, and he was taken up to heaven in a pillar of undertaker's fire.

The Reverend was a man of simple faith and simple tastes. His heaven was no city set on a high mountain, garnished with precious stones. Rather, it was the heaven he knew—a land of water meadows and country lanes, glorious in summertime with marsh marigolds and meadowsweet.

*Alone with the grayling and his God—
And a fishing rod.*

FOR SOME DAYS, meanwhile, there had been strange goings-on in the Vicarage orchard. Sitting in his study one afternoon, the Reverend heard squeals, screams and shouted instructions, then a crash followed by such a commotion that he could only suppose someone had knocked over a beehive and was being stung to death.

Actually, it was Mary learning to ride a bicycle, assisted by Johnny. When the Reverend appeared at the back door, instruction had reached

the stage when the co-pilot releases his hold of the controls and his pupil becomes air-borne. Away went the bicycle, and only a friendly apple-tree saved Mary from a ducking in the Thames.

All this activity had been started by Johnny's ridiculous statement that the Thames had nothing on his own Rio Grande. He had even gone so far as to claim that it was "a no-account little creek." This had so upset Mary that she wouldn't have him round for the rest of the week.

When his patriotic fervour had cooled, Johnny appeared and ate humble pie. He had been all wrong: it was the Rio Grande that was a no-account creek. Would Miss Mary take him on a pilgrimage to the source of England's mighty river? Johnny could secure two bicycles and teach her to ride.

Wednesday was the Day of Pilgrimage, chosen because Major O'Beirne would be paying his weekly call and could keep the Reverend company while Mary was away. A white mist spangling the spiders' webs gave promise of a sweet autumn day. Mary was placed reverently on the seat of her bicycle, and off they started into the silver morning along winding lanes, down drowsy village streets, past cottage gardens so tightly packed with flowers that each might have been a Victorian posy.

The nearer they got to the source of the Thames the more difficult their quest became. The brooks were so large and the actual river so small that it was almost impossible to tell the river from its tributaries. But they began to taste the thrill of all explorers as they neared their goal. Somewhere within sight of Kemble Steeple was the end of their pilgrimage. But round which corner, across which meadow was the birthplace of Britain's great national river? Johnny asked everybody but they all seemed to think it didn't matter. The river itself, now no wider than a wash-tub, went dwindling away through a bramble hedge where none could follow.

Finally they found an old man leaning on a gate. "Yes," he said. "I been livin' in these parts nigh on ninety year. When I wur a bwoy I had heard summat about a river as started thereabouts, but that wur a long time ago, afore the old Queen died. No river there nowadays. Only ditches and suchlike, none on 'em fit to float a sprat."

Leaving this unhelpful museum piece propped up against his gate,



they climbed the great ridge of the old Roman Road, and here Johnny decided that, if he had failed to find the source of the Thames, he had certainly discovered the heart of England. For he was looking down into that cradle of all good things which is bounded on one side by the Berkshire Downs and on the other by the Cotswold Hills.

Here are to be found those little limestone villages that are so sad on dull days and so happy when the sun is shining, those great thirteenth- and fourteenth-century tithe barns, and those little, laughing rivers with lovely English names: Coln, Leach, Windrush and tiny Dickler.

Johnny could not have described the panorama in detail but he felt the wonder of it all. Some Americans still feel their roots tugging at them from such scenes as this; and here was an American who, for one magical moment, would have died for England.

Seeing him stand there so quietly, Mary thought that he was disappointed. "I'm sorry, Johnny," she said, "I thought it would've been bigger than that."

"Sorry for what?" Johnny asked.

"Dragging you all this way to find the start of the Thames."

"Oh, the *Thames*! Forget it." And then Johnny did a most surprising thing. He took Mary in his arms and, for no particular reason, kissed her until the two of them were caught between crying and laughing.

They discovered the source when they had forgotten to worry about it. A friendly young fellow driving a combine harvester explained its mysteries. "In wet summers," he said, "it starts over on the left side of the Road and trickles down through Mr. John Phillips's field. In dry summers like this, it starts at the big spring by that windmill you can see in a dead line with Kemble Steeple."

So they walked across fields and found the baby Thames bubbling out of a very ordinary hole in the ground, with no noise and no nonsense. "All very English," thought Johnny, "to make so little fuss about such a big thing." The two explorers took off their shoes and stockings and paddled in the ice-cold, crystal-clear water which barely covered their ankles.

The sun was dropping behind the ridge before they made a move for home. Sitting by the old Roman Road, Mary had learned a lot of the strange place "back home," to which Johnny would be going when his three years in England were up. Not quite the picture she had imagined. No bandits holding up the stage-coach at Bitter Creek; just a wonderful country, so large you could put England into a corner of it. Perhaps Johnny would take her back home with him. A little frightening, all those miles from Merriford, but Johnny would be there to look after her and that was all that mattered.

And then Mary fell headlong out of her land of dreams. Three years was a long time; anything could happen in three years. Suppose something happened to the Reverend. Suppose she had to go away from Merriford and never saw Johnny any more . . .

MAJOR TALBOT O'BEIRNE, late of the Inniskilling Dragoons, drank, gambled and swore. Definitely a poor type, judged by Mrs. Gosso's standards. He existed on an inadequate pension eked out by precarious investments. Once, following an unhappy flutter on the Stock Exchange, he failed to appear at the Thatchers Arms for a month; but his life was saved by the village milkman, who substituted, each morning, a bottle of stout for the usual ration.

Coming fresh to Merriford, the Major had called at the Vicarage, where he had found the Reverend trying to lure a cannibal trout from

its hole. Sitting on the river-bank, the Major had watched this proceeding, and, from this small beginning, a mutual tolerance and respect had ripened with the years. The Major was no church-goer, yet the Reverend turned to him for succour and support. Angling, like adversity, makes strange bedfellows.

Every Wednesday evening, the Irishman would wobble up the Vicarage drive on his rusty bicycle, and the two old cronies would talk the sun down the sky. Tonight, the Reverend fired his usual opening shot: "I didn't notice you in church on Sunday, Major. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"'Tis the weight of meself on me game leg, and your church set in the centre of a great field, miles from anywhere. And what sort of a religion," continued the Irishman, "is it anyway which throws a man's backslidings in his teeth? Small wonder they've been after putting a red warning light on the church. Small wonder the bells has stopped calling the lonely traveller to the house of God. . . ."

"Suppose I told you, Major," said the Reverend, "that we may never hear the bells of Merriford ring again? When the Americans climbed the tower"

"I knew it!" gasped the Major. "Listening for the bells, I said to myself, 'And what has those Americans been up to now? Not content with drinking all our whisky,' I said, 'must they steal the very church bells to melt down for their infernal machines?'"

"No fault of the Americans," said the Reverend. "The timbers in the belfry are crumbling. If you were to die tomorrow I wouldn't dare to have the big bell tolled for your funeral."

This gloomy prospect brought the Irishman up with a jerk. "How much will you be needing for them, Father?" he asked.

"Two thousand pounds," said the Reverend.

The Major sat back. "Holy Mother!" he gasped.

"I hoped you might be able to advise me on what to do."

Major O'Beirne considered his personal resources and dismissed them. Winning a football pool could not be depended upon. The dress suit he had bought back in the twenties had the moth in it. Petty cash realized fifteen shillings. But he had two assets: a store of optimism which made

Mr. Micawber look like something out of the Book of Job, and his family motto. "Face the sun and all the shadows will fall behind you." At the end of an hour's discussion he had the Reverend somewhat comforted, though nothing tangible had emerged to ease the situation.

"And suppose the two thousand pounds is not forthcoming," asked the Major. "What then?"

"Then I should have to consider resigning the living in favour of a younger and more active man."

The Irishman rose and hobbled to the door. "Mary!" he shouted. "Call the ambulance!"

Mary, just back from exploring the Thames, came running. "The Parson's gone mad," the Major told her, "raving mad!"

"If I call the ambulance it isn't the Reverend they'll take," Mary said. "What have you been doing to him this time?"

"'Tis the church bells. The poor man is sick in the head with the worry of it. His talk is of resigning and handing over to a younger man."

Mary went white. So it had happened. They would have to leave the Vicarage and once again she would be alone in the world. No home, no garden, no Reverend to care for. No Johnny! Mary left the study, ran down the stone passage and turned her face to the kitchen wall.

The Major watched her go, then turned to the old clergyman sitting in his chair. The peaceful picture infuriated the Irishman. What had this old man to lose compared with that young girl who had looked to be fainting? He crossed the carpet and shook the Vicar by the shoulder.

The Reverend looked up in gentle surprise. "Dear me," he said, "is anything the matter?"

This was too much for the Major. "Is anything the matter?" he echoed. "What sort of Christian soldier is it who sits in an arm-chair, leavin' his fellows to fight the Lord's battles? Put on that shining armour! Sound the loud clarion, man, and forward into battle go!"

"But the money must be found," said the Reverend.

"Practise what you preach," said Major Talbot O'Beirne. "The Lord will provide."

And up in her little room, Mary prayed herself sick; and then, having as little faith as the rest of us, cried herself to sleep.

NOW PEOPLE seemed to think and talk of nothing but the bells, and the silence on Sunday evenings was hardly to be borne. There was no passing bell when old Mrs. Vardon died, and when Kitty Frost got married it was more like a funeral than a wedding. There were folk in the parish who never bothered about the bells till they stopped ringing. Now they were after the Reverend like a pack of hyenas, driving him to distraction. The Reverend went through all the church accounts again, but there was little help there. Sunday School, £6; Alms Box, £3; Fête, £29; Balance at Bank, less than £70.

Bells, bells, bells—Mary had never heard of Edgar Allan Poe, but night after night imaginary bells tolled like a dirge against the background of her unhappy dreams.

At last she decided to tell Johnny all about it. he might be more help than the Major. Johnny's father had a big business, and when he got back home Johnny himself was going into business. Yes, Johnny would find a way to get the bells ringing again.

When Johnny heard that there was a chance of the Vicar leaving Merriford—and, Johnny supposed, taking Mary with him—he was all for prompt action. He had no doubt that things could be fixed up; a talk with the Reverend might do the trick. Johnny was quite convinced that he could fill the church to overflowing in a couple of weeks. After that the rest would be easy.

And so one evening he found the Reverend in his orchard, and got into conversation with him. After admiring the Reverend's Blenheim Oranges, he drifted cautiously into a discussion concerning the church militant. Had the broadcasting of cathedral services affected the size of congregations in country districts?

The Reverend did not think so. Church attendances had declined in late years, but there were many causes for this.

What steps were the clergy taking to stop the decline?

The Vicar of Merriford considered this inquiring layman with a tolerant eye. "What steps do you suggest?" he asked.

Upon which Johnny proceeded to give him the works. Why not apply business principles? When a businessman was faced with sales resistance, what did he do?

"What does he do?" asked the Reverend mildly.

"He doesn't sit down without putting up a fight," said the young American. "My own father started his store on a shoe-string."

"On a shoe-string!" said the Reverend admiringly. "Do you suggest that I too could learn to overcome 'sales resistance'?"

"Sure!" said Johnny. "You've got a good product here, but you have to sell it. Start a supporters' club. Put some pep into the sermons. Let the folk know you're around! Borrow a loud-speaker! Get cracking!"

"We've been hiding our light under a bushel," the Reverend said resignedly.

Later that evening Johnny said to Mary, "It's okay, honey. I've softened him up and he's ready to agree to anything."

When Mary took in his hot milk, the Reverend was still chuckling. "Mary, my dear," he said, "never leave me alone again with that young man. No doubt he means well. . . ."

"Of course he does," said Mary. "I hope you listened to him."

The Reverend smiled mischievously. "He wants me to put pep into my sermons. He thinks we should try to overcome sales resistance."

"Sales of what?" asked Mary.

"Shoe-strings," smiled the Reverend. "I gather he wants us to start by selling shoe-strings."

AFTER THAT it took Mary all her time to handle Johnny and the Reverend. Every evening, Johnny came along with a new scheme for putting Merriford on the map, but so surely as he appeared so surely did the Reverend go to ground like an old dog fox. Mary had her work cut out explaining to Johnny why he wasn't about any more.

Finally, Johnny announced that they would have to get along without him. The next evening he appeared with a tall, gangling youth whose lugubrious, dead-pan countenance betrayed the poker addict. "This is Walter," he announced. "He's our Public Relations Officer. A man of few words, but give him a typewriter and watch the dollars dance! Give him the dope and he can make a bill of lading read like a dime novel. Am I right, Walter?"

"Yep," said the man of few words.

And so Mary, spurred on by Johnny, told her plain, unvarnished tale. Now and again Walter would betray a flicker of interest in some quite irrelevant point—such as why the little church stood all alone in the field half a mile from the village. He had never heard of the Black Death—so he said—nor of the villagers who had fled to higher ground with their heroic parish priest. Walter listened to it all, his dead-pan face betraying nothing as he sat quietly taking notes.

FAR ACROSS the sea from Merriford, it was Press day in the office of the Pottsville, Texas, *Sentinel*; and the Editor sat in his shirt sleeves wondering where he was to find a story big enough to justify a scare-head on his front page. For the past week, his town had been acting like a girls' Sunday school. In desperation, he turned to the basket of stories and Press releases that, in his Assistant Editor's opinion, had failed to make the grade. He flipped through pages of unpromising stuff. Then his eye was caught by the title of one mimeographed release: NON-STOP FROM TEXAS. Another of those homesick G.I.s, he supposed, describing his personal reactions to life abroad. Yes, there it was; all the usual stuff: first sight of old country, old churches, old pubs. . . .

At any other time the Editor might have counted ten, but it was Press day and his front page was empty. He threw the manuscript at his assistant.

"Splash it across three columns," he shouted. "I know it's lousy, but give it all you've got, and don't argue."

Told briefly, the story boiled down to this:

In a strange, wild corner of England, called Merriford, the United States Air Force had discovered a prehistoric settlement of Britons, so primitive in their habits that central heating was unknown and beds had to be thawed out nightly with warming pans. The natives were friendly but inarticulate. Their language was almost incomprehensible to civilized visitors. They drove on the wrong side of the road, and there was no real money. . . .

On Sunday mornings in Merriford, the bells in the old church tower sent their sober melody across the wet meadows, and young Americans from the Air Base joined the ruddy-faced peasants as they moved

reverently to their parish church, strangely set in a great field, half a mile from the village. . . .

"Such was the scene as recently as two short months ago. Today, in his lonely vicarage, an old, tired parish priest listens vainly for the message that will summon his faithful flock to Evensong. For the bells of Merriford no longer sound across that quiet countryside." Walter was getting into his stride. "The present situation goes back to the time when a mysterious epidemic, known as the Black Death, ravaged England. Whole villages were wiped out, and piles of bodies were thrown into great pits. Many of the faint-hearted fled from Merriford, but a gallant remnant of stalwart yeomen, led by their devoted parish priest, stayed on to tend the dying.

"With the colder weather, the epidemic died down. The heroic priest led the tragic remnant of his flock to higher ground and bade them build new homes in healthier surroundings—leaving their church to dream alone among its green fields.

"Then the quiet years slipped by, wiping out memories of old, unhappy things." Walter was working up to his point. "And now, suddenly, a second calamity has descended upon Merriford and its devoted priest. After a party of American engineers from the near-by Air Base had fixed a homing light to the tower of the little church, it was discovered that the ancient timbers were so damaged it was no longer safe to ring the bells.

"Once again, a death-like silence has fallen over the stricken valley, and the parish priest, overwhelmed by this new disaster, wonders how he and his handful of parishioners can ever find the money to start the bells of Merriford ringing again."

THE ASSISTANT EDITOR of the Pottsville *Sentinel*—a brash youth with a taste for rock 'n' roll—had never heard of the Black Death and six centuries more or less meant nothing to him. It wasn't quite clear whether the United States Air Force had damaged the church tower with their jets, or how many airmen had been exposed to this Black Death epidemic, but time was short and he had been told not to argue. The story would take a bit of selling. He proceeded to play it big.

MEANWHILE, in the Vicarage garden, Johnny was sharing the fate of all great business executives who fail to deliver the goods. "What," asked Mary, "has come of all your fine talk? Where is your friend Walter and those wonderful newspaper stories that were going to raise money for a new belfry? If this was all a joke you should be ashamed." And Mary started to cry.

"Now, honey!" pleaded Johnny. "People can't be rushed. Dallas wasn't built in a day!"

But Mary was getting frightened. The Reverend was up to something. For several days he had been writing a mysterious letter which he slipped under the blotter every time she came into the study. When, at last, she took it to the post she found that the envelope was addressed to the Bishop:

Yes, the Reverend was certainly up to something. He had been having a tussle with his Conscience, and he had got the worst of it.

"Tell me," asked Conscience, "how is the Appeal Fund going?"

"Oh, so-so!" replied the Reverend. "Only so-so. I'm afraid finance isn't my strong point."

"You find all these figures a little bewildering?"

"Exactly!" The Reverend could have bitten his tongue out. He saw where Conscience was manoeuvring him. "One doesn't get any younger," he added lamely.

"Ah!" said Conscience. "The position of parish priest calls for more than warm sympathy and a kindly bedside manner."

"I suppose so," admitted the Vicar of Merriford.

"After all," said Conscience, "the Master didn't clutter up His ministry with a lot of doddering old disciples. They were labourers, artisans, fishermen in the prime of life."

"I take exception to being called a doddering old disciple," said the Reverend. "I may be a little shortsighted. . . ."

"Blind as a bat!" said Conscience. "What about that time you nearly christened one of the godfathers?"

"A man isn't necessarily senile because he happens to leave his spectacles at home."

"And your memory isn't what it was. No wonder poor little

Miss Robbins was upset when you inquired after her new baby."

"I was never good at names," explained the Reverend.

"Why not be honest with yourself?" asked Conscience. "Why not admit that you're getting past it?"

"You're very hard," sighed the Reverend.

"Of course I'm hard," said Conscience sadly. "It's my job to be hard." And the celestial surgeon put away his scalpel, for his work was done.

ABOUT THIS TIME, the Bishop of Wessex sat down to write a letter to a parish priest in his diocese. It was a very difficult letter to write, for it involved giving pain to one who had served his church faithfully over a long period of years.

Twice the episcopal pen was dipped in the episcopal ink, and twice the ink was allowed to dry without making a mark on the paper, for the Bishop was a kindly man. But things were getting serious at Merriford. Moreover, the parish next to it was vacant, and the Pastoral Committee had recommended that this parish be united with Merriford. A young and vigorous man could then be found to tackle both parishes at once. Such a man could raise the money needed for the repairs to Merriford's steeple.

But oh, thought the Bishop, why must parish priests grow old, and why must Bishops be faced with such painful decisions?

"My dear Stanton," the Bishop finally wrote. "You will shortly be completing a ministry of fifty years in your parish. You have done fine work in your community. Indeed . . ."

The letter was never completed. The Bishop of Wessex had barely written these lines when he received an envelope bearing the Merriford postmark:

"My dear Bishop," wrote the Reverend. "I have felt for some time that the work of even a small country parish is getting a little beyond me. I had hoped to complete fifty years in the service of the Church but, in view of the special effort now demanded, I feel that it would be unfair to let my personal feelings prejudice an already difficult situation. . . ."

Conscience, it is said, makes cowards of us all, but Conscience had for once made a hero.

UP IN THE Officers' Club at the Air Base, the Base Commander and some of his officers were having a get-together, sorting out all those tremendous trifles that complicate life in a service community. Among those present were the Chaplain, Medical Officer, Public Information Officer, Education Officer and Special Projects Officer.

The Colonel began: "Chaplain, I've had a rather serious complaint about your department. Mrs. Gossop regrets . . ."

He was interrupted by a roar of laughter. Every officer present had received a letter from Mrs. Gossop regretting this or that, and "Mrs. Gossop regrets" had become a catchword.

"Mrs. Gossop regrets," continued the Colonel, "that a perfectly reasonable protest addressed to the Chaplain 'called forth a facetious, even impudent reply quite out of keeping with his sacred office.' How about it, Chaplain?"

"Mrs. Gossop," said the Chaplain, "complained that a local girl, 'notorious for associating with the lowest type of American serviceman, spent half an hour in her front porch with a young airman. Mrs. Gossop wanted to know what this mere boy was doing in her front porch at that time of night. I referred her to the Information Officer.'"

"You did," said the Information Officer. "I forgot to thank you."

"If you keep dragging him into it, Chaplain," said the Colonel, "I'll make you swap jobs. He'd preach a better sermon."

"Make the transfer at five o'clock today," said the Chaplain, "and I'll be the happiest man on the Base!"

"Why five o'clock?" asked the Commanding Officer.

"At five o'clock," said the Chaplain, "I have a date with an airman, third class, who is twenty years old. He wants to marry the eighteen-year-old daughter of a local farmer. I will ask him if he has written to his folk and he will say, 'What's the use? They don't understand.' Then I will ask whether the girl has told *her* folk, and he will say, 'What's the use? They don't understand, either.' Then I will ask him to produce nine hundred dollars to cover his girl's passage to the States and the cost of setting up a home. When I have loosened his collar and he has revived, I will explain that when he is promoted to staff sergeant he gets free transport home for his wife, and need produce only three hundred

bucks as financial responsibility, but that it will take a minimum of two to three years to become a staff sergeant. And he will say, sorry, but there are reasons why they can't wait that long. Then he will ask me to lend him the nine hundred dollars."

"All right, Chaplain, you win!" said the Base Commander, and they proceeded to the main item for consideration, the celebration of Thanksgiving Day in three weeks time.

There was to be a parade, followed by street dancing in the big square. The Bishop of Wessex would bless the feast; the Base Commander would deliver his usual address on Anglo-American Relations; the Base band would play "Deep in the Heart of Texas"; and there would be turkeys from Fort Worth, ten-gallon Stetsons from Dallas and cowboy shirts from Houston to add to the fun. Stands would be erected on two sides of the square, and the Base Commander ran his finger down a list of V.I.P.s invited to occupy them. "What about the Parson?" he asked.

"He'd come with his Bishop," said the Chaplain.

"Better send him a separate invitation," advised the Commander. "I'd hate to hurt his feelings—he's a nice guy."

The meeting was breaking up when an orderly handed the Colonel a letter marked *Urgent*. He read it and then called to the Medical Officer. "Doc!" he said. "Why wasn't I told about this epidemic?"

"Epidemic?" exclaimed the Medical Officer. "We've had no epidemic—apart from the usual outbreaks of lunacy among the fly boys."

"Somebody's gone crazy." The Commander proceeded to read from the document: "The writer has heard with deepest sorrow of the disasters that have fallen upon Merriford; the epidemic which cost so many lives and the collapse of the belfry in the parish church. While the dead cannot be brought to life, it is surely the duty of right-thinking Americans to rally round the heroic parish priest and repair the damage apparently due to the negligence of the U.S.A.F. The writer, who is of British descent, encloses a small cheque to be applied to the immediate repair of the church tower. 'Come all to church, good people!'" Signed: 'A Daughter of Texas.' " The Colonel paused to let the effect of this odd communication sink in.

"Any address?" asked someone.

"Only the postmark. Anyone heard of Pottsville?"

"Search me!" said the Information Officer.

"They've been having some trouble with the church tower," said the Chaplain. "Haven't been able to ring the bells for weeks."

"When my boys were fixing the light on the steeple——" began the Projects Officer.

The Base Commander was not one to worry about trifles. "Okay, boys," he said. "We'll tie it up with Thanksgiving Day. Get the old Parson to come, and I'll give him the cheque at the right moment."

"What about the epidemic?" asked Doc.

"Bats in the belfry," said the Commander. "Passed to Chaplain for necessary action."

"How about this suggestion that we damaged the tower?" asked the Projects Officer.

"Could be," said the Commander. "Once your clumsy crew gets started on a job, there's no telling what might happen. Rig them up a temporary support to keep their bells going till they get them ringing good and proper."

"On what authority?" asked the Projects Officer.

"Here's your authority," said the Colonel, composing a memo aloud. "The Commanding Officer, fearing that the absence of church bells may affect the morale of personnel at Merriford Air Base, hereby instructs the Projects Officer to install a temporary structure which will permit the said bells to be rung for the greater glory of God, the United States of America, and those details of the U.S.A.F. under his immediate command. . . ."

"And if they won't let us into the church?" persisted the Projects Officer.

"I'll ring up the Bishop," said the Commander.

"YOU SEE, Bishop," explained the Base Commander on the telephone, "our boys miss those church bells. You're very kindly coming to bless our Thanksgiving dinner, and we would consider it an appropriate gesture if you would allow us in return to put up a temporary structure to get the bells going again."

The Bishop of Wessex was dumbfounded. "But why," he asked, "should we be indebted to you for this extraordinary kindness?"

The Base Commander, having acted on impulse, was at a loss to justify his good intentions. "Well, Bishop," he explained, "we like that old padre of yours down in the village. Anyhow, it's just a couple of temporary girders to keep the bells from falling."

The telephone does not lend itself to protracted argument. In the end, the Bishop agreed to a preliminary investigation. Such is the English way. . . . The Base Commander instructed his Projects Officer to get going. The thing was as good as done.

The Reverend, for his part, was a little bewildered by the sudden arrival of a working party from the Air Base. But he had been expecting a further official investigation and this, he supposed, was it. He handed over his spare keys and hoped for the best.

THE MORNING of Thanksgiving Day was bright and not too cold—a truly rare November day.

At the Vicarage, Mary was in a state of suppressed excitement for the Bishop would be coming to tea after visiting the Air Base, and she was wearing her new nylons for the great occasion.

The first thing was to get the Reverend to the ceremony in time. Now, in the sunshine on the Vicarage drive, she took stock of him. The Reverend certainly paid for a bit of looking after—wonderful man for his age, with that fine old face and that nice twinkle in his eye, and his shoes Mary had polished until they shone like the study floor. Mary was quite proud of him as she sent him off. He would stand up to any of them.

And what of Mary? The last few months had certainly done something to Mary! From being a little scrap of a thing, she had blossomed out into a young woman worthy of any airman's wolf whistle. There was about her an air of distinction that made her stand out from the other village girls, especially today when excitement lent a touch of colour to her cheeks.

She laid the table, took the cakes out of the oven, and then went along herself to the Air Base. Country people were crowding in from the little

villages, and there was a great welcome arch over the entrance. A large military policeman handed Mary a programme and a bag of sweets.

She wandered through the carnival ground and across to the stands, already packed. By luck she found a seat. Then she looked round the square to see what had happened to the Reverend. Behind a platform were ranged all the notabilities of the district, with a row of empty seats for the Commanding Officer and his friends. Her eyes searched anxiously, but no Reverend was to be seen.

And then she found him, away at the end of the back row, a solitary lonely little black spot. Mary was furious. He had probably slipped in and nobody knew he was there, but *someone* might have kept a look-out for him. A minute later, however, she saw the Chaplain up in the back row persuading him to come down and sit next to the Bishop. Mary could relax. She settled down to enjoy herself.

Johnny had warned her he wouldn't be around until after the parade. That wouldn't be long now. Mary fairly shivered with excitement. This was the first ceremonial parade she had seen.

Here they came! First the band, then the officers—and then Johnny. How well all the airmen marched and how smart they looked! Especially Johnny!

The Colonel's speech was a great success. He admitted the difficulty of setting up huge military establishments in another country in peacetime, but now that Americans had learned not to talk to strangers in railway carriages, everything was fine. Indeed, the British were beginning to adopt some American customs. He looked forward to the day when he would meet his old friend the Vicar complete with blue jeans, windbreaker and a crew cut.

The audience laughed—and then, suddenly, as though joining in the laughter, the bells of Merriford church started to ring again. The Americans, having finished their work in the belfry, had smuggled in ringers from surrounding villages without a soul being any the wiser. A watcher on the tower had passed down a signal from the Air Base, and the Great Surprise, so happily conceived, so beautifully timed, was complete. The bells of Merriford were ringing again. It was almost as though the gates of some celestial Festival Hall had swung open and

all the angels had started singing.

Everybody was looking at the Reverend—who was looking at his Bishop—who was looking at the Base Commander—who was laughing. "Sorry, Bishop," said the Colonel. "Thanksgiving Day! We must have our little joke! Go ahead, it's all yours."

The Bishop rose from his seat and stood for a moment listening, like everyone else, to the bells. When they fell silent, you could have heard a pin drop in a haystack. Finally, the Bishop spoke. "We sometimes tell one another," he said, "that the Age of Miracles is past. When we talk like this we are apt to forget our American friends. When I

suggest that the Americans can perform miracles, I am not referring to supernatural events but to the kind of physical, material miracle we have just been enjoying. At the back of every miracle, secular or spiritual, there must be a motive worthy of the wonder which it creates—and the motive behind this modern Miracle of Merriford must be apparent to all. It is prompted by kindness and good neighbourliness.

"Speaking for my old friend here, his parishioners and myself, I can only say how deeply grateful we are to you, sir, and to all who may have been concerned in this happy gesture of good will."



"Ladies and gentlemen," said the Base Commander, "your Bishop forgot to remind you that this renovation my boys rigged up is strictly temporary. Any time in the next two hundred years, you're liable to run up against the same trouble. So to be on the safe side, I'm handing to your padre here a small cheque, from an anonymous Texas well-wisher, to get him out of the red when that time comes."

Upon which the band struck up "Deep in the Heart of Texas" and Mary hurried off to join her Johnny.

The Americans certainly did things in a big way. Never in the history of Merriford had there been such a celebration. Buffets were ranged all round the parade ground, and in the big dining hall there were corn, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, pumpkin pie and turkey.

Johnny told Mary that turkeys ran round in his part of Texas like chickens on an English farm. There was a place called Sweet Valley. . . . When he had finished his three years service he was going to get himself a wife and together they would run a turkey farm in Sweet Valley to supply the British market.

"You wouldn't be afraid of a whole farm full of turkeys, would you?" Johnny said

"Oh no!" said Mary. "If I can manage you and the Vicar I could surely manage a few turkeys."

WHAT WITH all the events of that eventful day, the afternoon was well advanced before the Reverend and his Bishop finally found themselves sitting over the big fire in the Vicarage. They talked comfortably for a while; and all the time the Reverend was waiting for the kindly words that would mark the close of his ministry. Finally he could bear the suspense no longer.

"You got my letter, Bishop?" he asked.

"Letter? What letter?" asked the Bishop.

"My letter of resignation," explained the Reverend.

"Oh, *that!*" said the Bishop. "My *dear* fellow!" And he waved the unpleasant topic away as a matter of little importance.

"I felt you might be thinking that the time had come for me to hand over the living to a younger man."

The Bishop warmed his hands before the cheerful blaze. "Yes," he said at last, "I got your letter, but after the way you handled that difficult problem of the church bells . . ."

"After the way *I* handled it," gasped the Reverend.

"I found myself wondering what might have happened if we *had* handed over the parish to a younger man."

"But, Bishop, I had nothing whatever to do with it."

"These things don't just happen," smiled the Bishop. "Forget you wrote that letter. Why not stay and see the job finished? They gave you something to start your Appeal Fund."

"Dear me!" sighed the Reverend. "There I go, forgetting again. Now where did I put it?" A crumpled piece of paper fell from his handkerchief, and the Bishop, reaching down, picked it up.

"Every little bit helps," he said, smoothing it on his knee. "Why, bless my soul, what's this? Well, I . . . well . . . well, really!"

"Oh, dear," cried the Reverend, "what have I done now?"

The Bishop smiled. "How much is ten thousand dollars in real money?"

IT WAS a White Christmas of dry snow and bright sunshine with all the bells ringing. What the Bishop had not been afraid to describe as the Miracle of Merriford had proved a nine days wonder, and this season of the bells set all the tongues wagging again.

How dreadful if there had been no bells for Christmas! Fancy all that money coming from nowhere. They did say one of those American millionaires . . . But why? The mystery was never properly cleared up. "A Daughter of Texas," having done good by stealth, would apparently have blushed to find it fame.

Sweetly the bells, *ding-dong, ding-dong*, rang out across the quiet valley. Everyone went to church on Christmas morning. There were the decorations to look at; the choir walked in procession from the west door, and the carols were always worth listening to. Even Major O'Beirne slipped into a corner of the Vicarage pew.

Following Thanksgiving Day, quite a lot of Americans from the Base had started to attend the parish church; so, in one way and another, the

Reverend was faced with an overflowing congregation as he climbed the pulpit steps to deliver an abbreviated address that would permit his parishioners to get the geese and turkeys out of their ovens in time for their Christmas dinners.

Mary had warned him that their own turkey—mysteriously arrived from America—would be done to a turn by half past twelve, and she had invited her young airman to share their dinner. The Reverend smiled. She and Johnny had told him there would always be a welcome waiting for him in Sweet Valley, Texas. Sweet Valley—what a pretty name. . . .

But that was enough of day-dreaming. If he preached too long this morning Mary would never forgive him. The Reverend smiled again, remembering one of Johnny's strange phrases. "Get cracking!" he said to himself. Very well. He got cracking.





Reginald Arkell

JOURNALIST, lyric-writer and librettist for revues and musical comedies, poet, editor, biographer, sound and television broadcaster—Reginald Arkell was, for almost half a century, a well-known and well-loved personality in the London literary world. He founded and edited a number of popular magazines, and his work for the stage included a Crazy Gang revue and the dramatized version of the famous satirical “history” *1066 and All That*, which was a long-running success in the London theatre.

Yet despite all these demanding activities, Arkell, a gentle, witty man, was always a countryman at heart. He is chiefly famous for his books of garden verse, including *Green Fingers*, and his novels, *A Cottage in the Country* and *Old Herbaceous* (Reader's Digest Condensed Books, Winter 1955). He shared his wife's passion for gardening, and as much time as he could spare was spent at his country house in Wiltshire. Mr Arkell was in his seventies when he died in 1959.

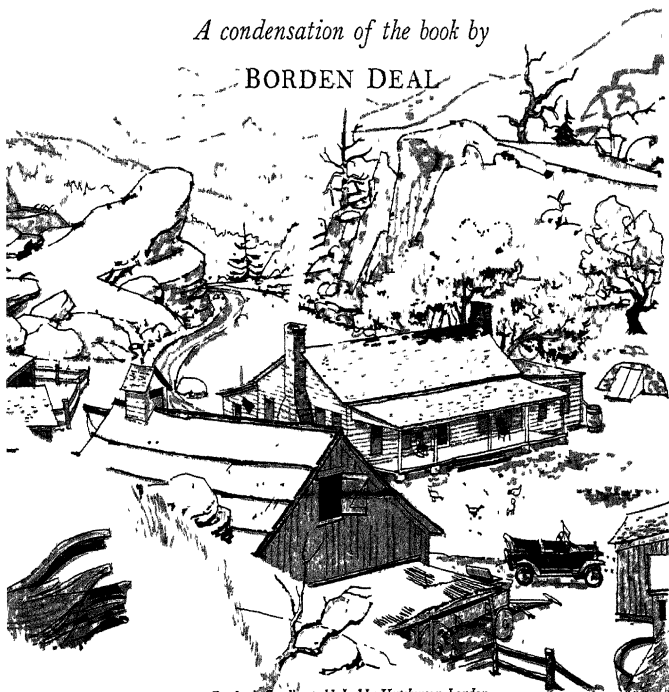


Illustrations by Ken Riley

DUNBAR'S COVE

A condensation of the book by

BORDEN DEAL



'Dunbar's Cove' is published by Hutchinson, London

FOR GENERATIONS the rich, black-loamed fields cradled in the hills along the Tennessee River had been Dunbar land. It was peaceful there—it was home for Matthew Dunbar and his family; there they were secure from the planning and power of modern development.

Then the Tennessee Valley Authority decided to extend their important hydro-electric scheme into the region. They sent young Crawford Gates to tell Matthew that the big dam they were building down-river meant the end of Dunbar's Cove. Matthew was a man of great kindness and strength; his children loved and respected him—Arlis, his elder daughter, perhaps most of all. But change is a force of life that cannot be denied for ever. And Crawford Gates represented change. So when he and Arlis fell in love a desperate conflict of loyalties arose—with Matthew at its centre.

This is a story of life close to the soil, set against a compelling background and movingly concerned with the hopes and heartbreaks of ordinary lives.

“A wonderful picture of man and the land.”

—Rumer Godden recommending
Dunbar's Cove for The Book Society

“A story whose scope is as sweeping and down-to-earth as the countryside that is so richly a part of it. . . . Mr. Deal has a narrative power to match his subject.”

—Hilary Seton in *The Sunday Times*

VISTA: *The Earth and the River*

THIS IS the river. It is an Indian of a river, drunk sometimes on flood-water the way only a North American Indian becomes drunk. It can be quiet, too, though violence lies always beneath the quietness. Yet this river is to be tamed and civilized as no other river in history has been tamed and civilized. This is the Tennessee.

Look how it flows; first south, then swinging in a big bend of rocky shoals and almost north again. There, north, above the bend, it leaves a valley and crosses a mountain range into another valley—why, no man knows. This is not a river that takes the easy way.

That crossing is The Narrows, thirty miles named the Suck, the Boiling Pot, the Skillet and the Frying Pan, whirlpooling between high, narrow banks, turbulent and unruly.

Below The Narrows is Chickamauga country, where the irreconcilable among the Cherokees came to escape the white man. They built five towns here, for a long time holding this earth against men and history. They put the brand of their irreconcilability upon the land. Few white men entered, and then only by becoming Chickamaugas, white Indians, irreconcilables themselves. Among these was a man named David Dunbar, more white than Indian in blood but more Indian than white in thinking and believing.

A national disgrace was committed to dispossess the North American Indians; but they left behind them their mark upon the earth. Others came, pure white, to possess the land, but the earth possessed them instead, putting the mark of its differentness upon them.

This is the land that belongs to the river: not easy to settle and tame, yet with warm pockets of comfort and home in its wildness. This land is craggy, backboned by mountains, yet wombed by creeks and coves cutting in gentle curves away from the river.

This is where one particular bit of land lies, that part named by the white Indian called David Dunbar. Above it an aeroplane flies its patterned sweep, for now, in a bold dream, men are preparing to impose their strategy upon the wild Indianness of the river. But here, on Dunbar land, the plane is unnoticed. This is a cove, curving gently away from where it opens into the river with a narrow creek-mouth and fanning deeply, fertile, into the gentle loin-slope of the hills.

Not far from the mouth of the cove is a big house, added to over the years. Once it had been log and then the log was torn away. Now it is grey, worn, rambling, cool under the huge oak tree that shades the grassless front yard, and pierced through the middle by a cool covered passageway where men can sleep in the heat of Sunday afternoon.

The back yard is grassless too, dusty and sunny, with a wash-pot standing over its pile of ashes. Beyond is the barn, awry with age, and beyond the barn are the fields, lying black-loamed along the gentle creek, merging in upward sweeps into the enfolding hills.

It is quiet here, and peaceful. White Leghorn hens dust themselves in the back yard. It is a hot day but a thin shimmer of smoke comes from the big fieldstone chimney that marks the living-room. A fire burns on that hearth the year round, kindled by the hands of David Dunbar and outlasting his life as it has outlasted that of his son and his grandson; as Matthew Dunbar believes it will outlast his own life.

Beyond, in the fields, men and animals are working. They do not look up at the drone of the mapping plane for it is not necessary. The dreams of other men cannot touch them here; strategy cannot prevail against their land and their river. For this is home. This is Dunbar's Cove.

Chapter 1

MISS HATTIE squatted on her heels in the depths of the thicket, gazing discontentedly at the careful complex of roads she had enjoyed for so long. Her fleet of snuff-bottle cars waited at her feet but somehow, today, she couldn't get launched into the absorption of play.

Miss Hattie was twelve years old. She was very thin under her cotton dress and her legs were spindly shanks, with not a hint of woman in them. She was highly discontented with her legs. Her face was thin and sharp and tanned, with large, luminous, black eyes.

She reached down tentatively to push a snuff-bottle into the road. Then she stopped again, not knowing her own mind. She had started building her world here in the thicket so long ago that she could scarcely remember when; it must have been somewhere back before last year. And now she did not like it.

The big thicket grew down out of the hill to the edge of the back yard of the house. It was cool under there even on the hottest days of summer. The bushes were close to the ground, with stiff, harsh limbs, and it was difficult for an adult to enter. The ground was interlaced with the carefully built roads Miss Hattie had dug through the leaf mould to the bare earth. It was possible to consume half an hour pushing just one of her fleet of cars round the looping turns she had built.

Last summer, she had spent almost the whole of every day in the thicket, emerging only upon the urgent calling and dire threats of an adult. But now . . . she nudged the bottle a few inches farther and stopped, listening. Arlis would be calling her soon and then she would be rescued from indecision.

Her timing was good. Almost immediately her sister's voice reached out. "Miss Hattie! Time to water the menfolks!"

She stood up without a trace of reluctance. "This is for *children*," she said aloud, scornfully, voicing the feeling that had been in her since the moment of entering the thicket.

Arlis, standing in the back porch, was surprised to see her little sister emerge so quickly from her sanctuary. When she reached the porch, Arlis put a hand on her forehead. "Are you feeling well, Miss Hattie?" she inquired. "You must be sick, coming the first time you're called."

Miss Hattie jerked away "I reckon I know when the menfolks get thirsty," she said tartly. "Where's my water bucket?"

Arlis laughed, turning into the kitchen. Inside the door, she felt the heat from the kitchen stove. She was baking bread; why, on such a hot day, she didn't know, except that her mother had always baked bread

on Tuesday. The kitchen was full of rich yeasty odour, high and light in her nostrils. She knew that the aroma was reaching out through the screen door to Miss Hattie so she paused long enough to cut two slices from a finished loaf and spread butter and sugar on them.

The kitchen was big and bare, with a wooden safe standing against one wall to hold dishes and food. In the middle of the room was a big, circular oak table, worn with polishing. Just now it was laden with her first baking of loaves, resting on soft, white cloths.

It was a kitchen that went with Arlis. She was big, rather buxom, with a high-coloured, good-humoured face. Her legs were sturdy, in the Anglo-Saxon way. She was twenty years old.

The butter-and-sugar sandwich finished, she got the clean syrup bucket from a nail and went out back to Miss Hattie.

"I don't believe I asked for a bite to eat," Miss Hattie said haughtily. But she grinned to show she didn't mean it and took the sandwich quickly. "Where's Connie?" she said.

Arlis jerked her head towards the other part of the house across the passage. "Where do you think? In there primping. Now you go on. Them men're going to have their tongues hanging out."

"I'm going," Miss Hattie said. Arlis noticed again how beautiful her wide, black eyes were in her ugly, unfinished face. "That's mighty good bread, Arlis. Why don't you get married? Any man would favour a woman who bakes bread ever' Tuesday."

Arlis's incipient tenderness was replaced by a sudden irritation. "Get married?" she said. She turned back into the kitchen. "How would I have a chance to get married, with a houseful of menfolks and you to take care of?"

But Miss Hattie was interested in her own thought. "Yes ma'am," she said. "A fine young man would shore go for your bread." She stopped, considering. "But then," she added, "Connie is the only married woman in this house and I don't believe she even knows how to make it."

Arlis snorted. "You'll learn something, young'un," she said. "A pretty face and a willing mind will go a lot faster to church than the best bread in the world. Just look at your sister-in-law."

“Don’t blame me,” Miss Hattie said. “Your brother Jesse John married her, not me.”

Arlis opened the stove door. “You go on, now,” she said, looking round. But Miss Hattie had already gone. She sighed, and then laughed. My land, the questions that child could ask!

But Miss Hattie had gone into the passageway instead of out into the yard again. She walked along the corridor and peeped into Connie’s and Jesse John’s room. Connie was sitting in front of the dressing-table she had made Jesse John order all the way from Sears, Roebuck. Miss Hattie had never liked that dressing-table, it had too many curlicues to suit her. She watched critically while Connie leaned close to the mirror to apply her lipstick. She was wearing only a slip, and her slender body looked frail after the robust bulk of Arlis. “Why do you spread it on so wide?” Miss Hattie said, taking one step into the room. “You’re putting lip where there ain’t no lip.”

Connie jumped, smearing the lipstick. She whirled round. “Good Lord, child! You’ll scare the fool out of me yet.”

“Who’re you putting it on for, anyway?” Miss Hattie said.

The tone of Connie’s voice changed. “What are you doing in my and Jesse John’s room?” she said sharply. “You ought to be carrying water to the field right now.”

Miss Hattie retreated a step. “Jesse John don’t like lipstick no-way,” she said primly. “I heard him say so.”

“It don’t matter what Jesse John likes,” Connie said harshly “I don’t wear it for his benefit. Now, get on out of here.”

With dignity, Miss Hattie went out and across the passageway again. Going to the well in the back yard, she let down the chain, hearing the screech of the rusty pulley singing in her ears. The well bucket hit bottom and a weight came suddenly on the chain. She strained her thin body against it, swung the dripping bucket up to the kerbing and stood panting for a moment before she tipped the bucket and poured until the gallon syrup bucket was full. She took the time to pour the cooling balance over her dusty feet. Dust became mud and she squished her toes for three deliberate squishes. Then she picked up the syrup bucket and walked through the open barn-yard gate into and through the



shadow of the barn. On her way she saw Grandpaw going slowly towards the outbuilding. She watched his creeping progress for a moment, wondering how he knew long enough in advance to get there in time. It always took him at least thirty minutes to achieve his destination.

Round the corner of the barn, the White Leghorn rooster pranced towards her menacingly, his feet scratching dust. "Go on," she said scornfully. "I ain't none of your old hens."

She went quickly now, shifting the bucket from one hand to the other. The men were working far back in the cove and she was hot and tired by the time she came along the creek bank opposite them.

Matthew, her father, was at the far end of the field. Her eldest brother, Knox, was ploughing Odd John, the fast-stepping horse-mule and he was the closest to her. He looked up, seeing her coming. "Here comes the water!" he yelled, making the others lift their heads. His voice was as big as he was, but with a surprising light nervousness in it. He always talked louder than was necessary and he liked to open up



his lungs and yell against the hills. Miss Hattie crossed the ford and went past him.

"Miss Hattie," he said wheedlingly, "my throat is mighty dry for that fine water you're carrying."

"You've got time to plough two more rounds before I get to you," Miss Hattie said briskly. "So just coil up your tongue and keep going."

Next was Rice, the youngest brother, ploughing towards her with Mollie. He looked tall and gaunt and long-legged, confined between the plough handles. "Miss Hattie!" he said. He grinned at her out of his dark, thin face but she didn't pay him any heed, marching on.

Jesse John was ploughing Bodoc, the slow, lazy mule. It took a lot of work to get any work out of Bodoc. He was the smartest mule of them all. "Connie's getting all prettied up for you," Miss Hattie told Jesse John. He looked up, his face careful and unsmiling. He was smaller than the other boys, with red-rusty hair and freckles.

"That's mighty good to know, Miss Hattie," he said.

Matthew was ploughing towards her now and she began to hurry, stumbling over the fresh-turned earth. It was hilled up against the cotton, which was high now and ready to be harvested. Matthew stopped the plough, and smiled as he took the bucket from her. "You ought to have given them boys a swallow first," he said gently.

"Shoot!" she said violently. "And let them all slobber in the bucket before you get a drink, Daddy?"

He gazed down at her. She was the only one who called him daddy; to the rest of the family he was papa, or sir. But she was different; she was the youngest. He lifted the bucket and drank thirstily and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "That's mighty good, Miss Hattie," he said gravely. "I thank you."

She turned to go to the others. "I'll bring some more along about four o'clock," she said.

He shook his head. "I believe we'll be finished by then. Now go and give them boys a drink before they lay down and start hollering."

He watched her slender, boned-down figure as she walked away. She stopped first to give Rice water. They were built alike, the little girl and the grown boy, both slender. Maybe Miss Hattie would be a tall girl; you couldn't tell yet. Knox walked over to join them. Jesse John was turning at the end and coming back again.

Matthew Dunbar wiped his hand across his mouth and started rolling a cigarette, his eyes on his children, taking in the roll of land behind them. The sweat was cool on his grey work-shirt and his muscles were oiled and loose. He breathed deeply. Harvest time was always good, the way first ploughing and first planting were good, and the day they entered the fields for the gathering. So he stood, planted solidly behind the plough; a stocky man, heavy-built, with a broad, brown, pleasant face that was easy to smile even though there wasn't much laughter in him. He moved always slow and sure and easy with himself. With his feet on his land, he looked about him, and it was good.

There, far in the distance, was the house, under the big tree that had been planted by that first Dunbar, the white Indian. The creek flowed that way, too, straight into the river beyond. He liked the entering mouth of the cove. There were trees there, shading an unmade road,

and the creek. It was a narrow entering into the great fullness beyond, where the land swept back from the creek, broadening out in rich fertility up to the edge of the hills.

He finished the cigarette and took the handles of the plough into his hands, feeling the smooth, worn, comfortable fit of them, and clucked to the mule. He ploughed down until he was even with the boys clustered round Miss Hattie. Knox was laughing, teasing her. He was built like Matthew himself, solid and heavy, but there was a quickness, a restlessness, in him that no other Dunbar had.

Looking at him, Matthew felt the old question stir in his mind. *Was he the one?* He stopped and stood watching while Miss Hattie laughed at Knox's teasing. The question always came to him unexpectedly, in moments like this with his eyes on his children trying to see them not as children, but as they really were, grown and growing in their own pattern. There was one pattern that would be best for Dunbar's Cove, and it was his task to discover it.

Dunbar's Cove had never been split away in inheritances, not from the very beginning. It was a unity. It had come down to Matthew in that way, and it would pass in its entirety into another's hands.

Matthew himself had not been the eldest son. He remembered, now, the moment when his father had made the choice, had laid a hand on his shoulder and said, Dunbar's Cove will go to Matthew. Matthew hadn't expected to be chosen, though the hunger for it had been in his bones since he could remember. For the choice was a matter of selection rather than tradition, and any man of the family—or any woman, for that matter, though it had never happened—could be the inheritor, the master, the true owner.

He must choose well, as those before him had chosen. For Dunbar's Cove was a permanent thing. There were Dunbars far gone from here now, even living in other states. But Dunbar's Cove was still there, still home to every one of them, and they all knew that they could return the moment they chose to. Dunbar's Cove was Matthew's; but it was his only to pass on to the next Dunbar.

He stood considering his sons in turn, feeling a vague unease. Knox, the eldest, had the best chance, of course. He was big and level-headed;

except for that strange flightiness in him that did not go with the way he looked. He was a fast hand at dancing and with the girls, but that would pass. But the strangeness, the nervousness, bothered Matthew. Knox was like a bird that might fly away.

Jesse John. Already married, quiet, dependable. But he let his wife push him around. Maybe he was too meeky-mild, too easy-going. Matthew mentally shook his head. It would take some doing to pick a man who couldn't even manage his own wife.

His eyes lingered longest on young Rice. He didn't even look like a Dunbar with his tallness. The blood had welled up strange there. But he was a real farmer. Matthew could tell that he had the joy in him, the feel of the land, that Matthew had himself, a way of happiness when his plough was turning the earth before his feet. But he was only eighteen. Eighteen could change, be something else, by twenty. Eighteen is a changeable thing.

Matthew shook his head, wrapped the lines round the plough handles and walked across to join them. "I'll take a little more of that water if you don't mind, Miss Hattie," he said. "I can't seem to get the dry out of my throat." He took the bucket. "Miss Hattie brings the best water in the world!"

She scoffed, laughing. "Daddy! It's just old well water."

He smiled down at her. "But it changes when you bring it, child. It gits the taste of love in it."

She put an arm round him, leaning against him. "You sure you won't need another drink before quitting time?"

Knox looked at his father. "How long d'you think it'll take us, sir?" he said. "I sort of had my mind on that dance tonight."

"I'm going, too," Rice said quickly.

Knox grinned at him. "You take that Charlene to one more dance, you going to be going steady?"

Rice glared. "She ain't had your dirty paw laid on her, son."

Knox pranced in his tracks. "Not yet," he said. "I just ain't got round to her yet. But when I do——"

"Boys," Matthew said quietly.

They stopped then, seeing his eyes going towards Miss Hattie. She

turned away with her bucket. "I know what you-all are talking about," she said disdainfully. "It don't interest me none."

She walked away from them. She did know, too—and it was the craziest thing she'd ever heard tell of. She'd seen the old boar last spring, and that old White Leghorn rooster. She knew, all right.

Knox was embarrassed, looking at Miss Hattie's stiff, straight back. He saw Matthew's eyes were resting on him and he looked at his feet. He was twenty-four years old, but his father's eyes still had the power.

Matthew looked round the field. "You boys go on and take out," he said. "I can finish up here."

Knox and Rice whooped and ran to their mules to unhitch. Matthew smiled. He liked to finish alone, anyway. He always found an excuse to send the boys out of the field when he started the first ploughing for the year and when he finished the last. That was a time for work to be done reverently, gently, with a feeling in him that church never gave. "You go on, too," he said to Jesse John. "Connie's gonna be wanting to go to that dance, if I know Connie."

"Yes sir," Jesse John said. He went to take out Bodoc. She'd want to, all right, and she'd go. He actually believed that if he didn't take her himself, she'd go alone. And the dance was for young folks, unmarried folks, with sparking on their minds. Not for settled people like he wanted to be with Connie. The only married women there would be the older ones come to sit in straight chairs round the wall and keep a tight rein on the girls. But Connie'd be dancing with everybody just like she was still looking for her man. And that wasn't right.

Matthew did not start ploughing again until they had left. His mule was restless and aggrieved because the other mules were leaving the field. "Whoa, Prince," he said. "It ain't going to take us long."

He heard the rattling clamp of the boys' mules as they crossed the wooden bridge. They caught up with Miss Hattie, and Knox swung her on to Odd John's back where she rode high up on the withers, clutching the hames with both hands. Her silver bucket flashed in the sun.

"Get up out there," Matthew said softly then to Prince. "Let's finish this ploughing now."

Prince leaned into the collar and the plough handles came alive. They trembled in Matthew's hands like a woman and the moist earth curled and broke round the rooted stalks of cotton. The cotton was tall enough to brush against his overalled thigh with a rough, husky sound.

MARK, his elder brother, had been gone when Matthew earned his inheritance. One morning in May his bed had been empty when they had arisen to the new day of work. Matthew remembered it clearly now, as crystal as yesterday. Mark had been sleeping in the room that Knox and Rice slept in now, and his father, the old man who now huddled close to the perpetual fire in the living-room, winter and summer, had knocked on his door and received no answer. He had put his head inside, and withdrawn it slowly. "I knew he would be gone one of these mornings," he had said heavily. "I have been waiting for it."

There was no answer in any of them. Only, even in that instant, there had been a leap of hope in Matthew. In the moment of knowing that his elder brother had gone his own hunger for owning the cove licked out fiercely like a destroying flame. He had always wanted it. But, before this instant, he had never had a hope. He had bowed his head over his breakfast so that his father could not read his eyes.

That autumn his brother had still not returned, nor had they heard from him. He had vanished as though into another world. And on a day when the fields were full of cotton hands, during the mealtime on long plank tables under the oak tree, his father had laid his hand on his shoulder and said to the assembled workers, some Dunbar, some with other names, "Dunbar's Cove will go to Matthew." Matthew had stood still until the old man turned to him. "You can make next year's crop with me," he said. "I'm going to set down."

Matthew had turned his head, looking at the house, the tree, the land, and there was a different quality in the seeing. It was his now, to pass on to his own choice in turn.

"Yes, Papa," he had said. "I will make the crop."

That winter the old man took to a rocking-chair, sitting in the corner by the fire-place. Matthew had not realized the sudden coming of age upon him. He knew now that his father had been holding it at arm's

length, hoping for the return of his eldest son, until he could hold it off no longer.

That spring Matthew entered the fields alone to make the first ploughing. Only after that did he permit his two younger brothers to help him. They had ploughed and planted and gathered, the old man sitting ever quieter, frailer, in his chimney corner, and still Mark had not returned. He did not come until Matthew's sixth crop was in the ground.

But when Mark did come he had the look of far travelling in his hard face and his eyes were like agate marbles against the dust of roads and the coal of goods-trains. His hands were twisted and gnarled from day labour with pick and shovel, labour productive only of a night's rest and a night's eating. He came with an anger in him that glowed through his agate eyes at Matthew. "I've come back," he said.

Matthew had stood in the front porch, looking down at Mark in the yard. "You are welcome," he said.

Mark's eyes shifted. "Papa," he said. "Is he dead?"

"No," Matthew said. "But he's old. He's given Dunbar's Cove to me." He watched the flaring of the eyes, the movement of anger in the quickly tightened jaw.

"Until I came back it was yours," Mark said. "But I'm the eldest."

"No," Matthew said. "He gave it into my hands. I aim to keep it."

Mark had exploded then, surging up on the porch, with a knife suddenly in his hand. Matthew had never fought in his life, but he caught the wrist as the knife moved in, and hit Mark with the other hand, knocking him off the porch again. He jumped off the porch and lifted Mark, twisting the knife away from him, hitting him again and again, until Mark kicked him in the groin and the pain doubled him over under Mark's fists.

They fought all over the front yard while Matthew's young wife came screaming from the kitchen, while his brothers gathered, afraid to interfere for they had never seen Matthew like this before. Matthew's shirt was torn from his back and his right ear was bleeding. Mark's nose was mashed flat, broken. They stood still finally, hitting each other with steady fists, until Mark broke ground, giving back against the oak tree. Matthew pinned his throat with one hand and hit him four times,

slowly, until Mark's hands covered his face and his body was slack and defenceless.

Matthew drew back then, panting. "Dunbar's Cove is Dunbar land," he said. The words came gaspingly but he had to say it while Mark was defeated. "And any Dunbar can find a home here. But you. Any but you." He stopped, gulping. "If you set foot in this cove again," he said, "I'll kill you."

He waited to see if Mark understood. Mark lifted his battered face. He understood. "Go now," Matthew said.

Mark had wavered away from him then, and had gone along the creek road, out of the cove. Matthew had walked blindly, without seeing his young wife or his children or his brothers, to the porch. He had sat down on the lowest step, his head hanging between his legs, retching, bringing up bitter bile. But the bile in his mind, the bile of violence he had never known before, had gagged him even more.

That was why he had to be right now. He had been the chosen, and he had believed his father had chosen well, had believed even to the extent of fighting and violence to hold the inheritance. Not for his own hunger, but for the cove itself. He was sure it had not been for himself.

He lifted his head, realizing that he had finished the ploughing. He had followed the mule without knowing it, ploughing automatically as his mind retraced the harshest, bitterest day of his life. For Matthew was a gentle man and he had never had to fight again as he had fought that day.

He went round the plough to unhitch the mule and saw the stranger standing on the bridge watching him. He was a young man, wearing clean-pressed khakis, the shirt open at the neck, his broad shoulders flat under the pressed cloth. He started coming towards Matthew, walking easily, carefully, over the cotton rows as though it was a habit with him to be careful in a field.

"Howdy," Matthew said gravely when the young man was three rows away.

"Mr. Dunbar?" the young man said. "Mr. Matthew Dunbar?"

"That's me," Matthew said, regarding him. He had a pleasant, open face, browned by the sun, with crow's feet round the eyes.

The young man smiled, liking the broad, plain slowness in Matthew's face, the kindly welcome in his eyes. This would be an easy man to deal with, reasonable and honest. There were some who were not so. "My name is Crawford Gates," he said. "I'm from the T.V.A., the Tennessee Valley Authority. I suppose you received our letter recently."

Matthew smiled. "Son," he said, "I ain't been in to the post office since I put the first plough into the ground this spring. All I ever expect from Uncle Sam's mail is seed catalogues and a Sears, Roebuck for the outhouse."

Crawford Gates kept the frown from appearing on his face. It was always easier when they were prepared beforehand. "Well," he said easily, "I guess I'll be the one to break the news."

Matthew turned away for a moment. "You go on," he said. "I got to take out, if you don't mind."

"Go right ahead," Crawford said. "I'll help you." He stepped to the side of the mule and began looping up the plough lines on the hames. "The Tennessee Valley Authority wants to buy your land, Mr. Dunbar. That's what I've come to see you about."

Matthew didn't even straighten up. "My land," he said. He started laughing. "You might just as well quit talking right now, son. I——"

"You don't understand," Crawford said. "We're building a big dam about ten miles down the river. All this land will be flooded. You'll have to move somewhere else before the water comes." He looked at Matthew seriously. "But you'll be paid a good price."

Matthew straightened up then, a trace-chain in his hand. "Buy my land?" he said. He turned his head slowly, looking about him. Then he looked back at Crawford. His face was not angry. It was even friendly, explaining. "Son," he said, still smiling and easy, "I don't aim to sell."

CRAWFORD GATES's father had been a sawmill man, owning a portable gear that he transported to a site for a few months or a year of cutting, then dismantled and transported elsewhere. So Crawford had grown up with the smell of sawdust in his nostrils, with a knowledge of trees and timber as unconscious as the woods-wisdom of the fast-stepping, alert little mules that snaked logs out of the underbrush to the

mill. He had always liked to watch those mules; they were selected carefully for surefootedness and wit and the men who drove them used neither line nor whip, talking the logs out of the underbrush with clear quick staccato cries of advice and encouragement. He had seen the mules go down on their knees to pull, their feet scrabbling for a foothold, bracing on the logs as intelligently as a man. They snaked logs through a field of stumps, carefully angling them so that they never hung up, and the men rode the logs, talking into the mules' tilted-back ears.

By the time Crawford was twelve years old he could ride the logs and even the sawmill carriage himself, walking the big logs into the slicing saw, his hands working the levers as well as any man's. He was an ugly, rangy, rawboned kid, his muscles hard and stringy with the sawmill work, and he wore overalls and chewed tobacco like a man. He lived with his father in a tent on the sawmill site for he did not even remember his mother, and the boys of the scant and scattered schools he attended envied him his freedom. In time he became the regular sawyer, leaving his father free to cruise the area for more work. By the time he was twenty he ran the sawmill, hired and fired men, bought and sold timber, arranged for supplies and mule feed. He was a man.

Then, that summer, he told his father that he was quitting. He was going to school. His father looked at him in astonishment, not understanding. But Crawford Gates went. He was twenty years old and he was a man who wanted schooling. He would go to college and study civil engineering. He did not know, then, that his credits did not even approach the requirements. He did not find that out until he had walked out of the woods one day, with one hundred dollars pinned in his pocket with a safety pin, and caught the train to Knoxville, Tennessee. He took a qualification test in place of the missing credits and when he left the school two years later, for the summer of 1929, he expected to return in the autumn. But he never did. Times were bad for the sawmill that year. In August his father was working with an old saw that should have been scrapped. The saw broke and when they picked his father up one leg was hanging by a thin sliver of flesh.

That winter, Crawford ran the sawmill while his father hobbled about on a wooden leg, his face old and sagging now, his hands too trembly

to handle the levers. Once in a while, at night in the tent, Crawford would read his engineering text-books by the light of a guttering lantern. But that passed with time for the days were hard and his body was tired. Times grew worse and bills began to pile up. In the summer of 1930 they lost the sawmill.

Crawford's father cried when they came to haul away the old, rattly engine, the shining saws, the log-carriage on which he had spent a life and a leg. Crawford did not cry. The next week he went to work for another sawmill, a big stationary one. He hauled sawdust out of the pit, sweating as he pushed the wheelbarrow up the huge steep sawdust pile.

During the next few years, in the depths of the Depression, Crawford's ambition seemed to have left him. He lived in a boarding-house with other men of his kind; and at twenty-six he seemed almost middle-aged, as though his young manhood had passed. His father had retired to a piece of cut-over land where he lived alone on the money that Crawford sent him.

Then, in 1933, Crawford stirred again. Somehow, somewhere, he had heard of the Civilian Conservation Corps. He joined it, and was shipped to a camp in Mississippi where he was promptly made an Assistant Leader, with one yellow stripe on his arm. Within two months he was a Leader, and six months later he became a subaltern in a fire-fighting camp in Oregon.

He liked the C.C.C. He seemed to grow younger in contact with these boys from backwoods and city slums, directing and teaching them and occasionally having to beat one of them with his fists. It was a job that had a realness to it. They were protecting the trees from fire; and between fires they built roads and trails and picnic tables, making a park out of a wilderness, and thus he learned a new use and meaning for trees. Crawford changed in those years, grew again, with the beauty of the woods about him and the responsibility of the boys in his hands. Only the summons that he received could have made him leave it, a telegram from his father that said simply, *Son, you'd better come home now.*

He went home, and his father died the second night after Crawford walked up the hill road and turned in the door.

Crawford, now twenty-eight years old, waited a while before he knew

what he wanted to do. Then one day when he read about the Tennessee Valley Authority in the newspaper he knew that he had found it.

He sold his father's little piece of land—the money did not weigh heavy in his pocket—and went to Knoxville. He made his application, took his tests, and waited, supporting himself by washing dishes in a café. And one day a letter came for him, telling him that he was accepted. He was a timber cruiser for the T.V.A. He was a part of the great plan that he had read about in the newspaper, that he had studied with avid attention; and it was a big thing in his mind. This was more than trees and sawdust and men; this was a whole region, the land and the trees and the people and the river, all caught up to be moulded by a tremendous change.

As it turned out, he didn't cruise timber. With the illogic of urgency he was pressed into the Land Purchase Section, and he learned the function given him as capably as the brighter, surer men who surrounded him.

THIS WAS the man who now looked at Matthew, liking him and even partly understanding his stubborn resistance.

"Sir," Crawford said, "you know what the T.V.A. is doing here. . . ."

"I've heard tell," Matthew said. "Them dams they've been building up and down the river." He shook his head admiringly. "All that to make work for folks."

Crawford leaned forward. "It's not make-work," he said. "It's the mightiest thing ever brought to this country. They're harnessing the river, putting it to work where it's never worked before. They take that running water and put it through a turbine, and then spread electricity over the land, so that folks like you and me can afford it and use it like extra hands in the field. They tame the river at the same time, control it and use it. Why, in ten years you'll be seeing strings of barges passing every hour where now you don't see one boat a week."

"Except, the way you tell it," Matthew said softly, "I won't be here to see all that. I'll be moved over to make room for the water."

Crawford's face firmed. "And it's being built by us, Mr. Dunbar, for you and me and everybody. But it means some must move over and get

out of the way. When we're finished with Chickasaw Dam down there, ten miles below us, there'll be a hundred-mile lake along here."

Matthew looked about him at the earth, trying to imagine it. Bass and bream swimming here, water deep and blue, his rich earth an infertile mud below. He shook his head. "Son," he said. "This is Dunbar land. The government can build all the dams it wants to, it can lay electricity-carrying wire over this country as thick as honeysuckle vine; but it don't make no never-mind to me."

Crawford could see it was going to be a long way to understanding. "We're not coming in here to make you do anything," he said, keeping his voice quiet. "We're here to help you in the change that's coming. We could just move in with a court order in one hand and money in the other. But the T.V.A. doesn't work that way. The T.V.A. has got to live in this land, and it's got a feeling for the people it's going to live among. We can help you find a piece of land at a good price, as rich and fertile as this cove. Then you won't have any reason to fight the change."

Matthew felt a touch of exasperation. There was no way to make this insistent young man understand. He couldn't tell him all the way back to that first Dunbar who had settled here, naming the land and passing it on. No—this man thought of land as plot and acreage, with a price, divisible and saleable. Land was not earth to him. And there was no way he could explain the difference. He might as well put an end to it right now.

Matthew smiled. "Son," he said. "You been doing a sight of preaching. And I always feed the preacher a good meal. Why don't you come and take supper with us?"

Crawford laughed. "I ask your pardon," he said. "But when a man believes in something, he's just got to preach it."

Matthew laid a hand on his shoulder. He was surprised at the firm muscles there. This is a man who's worked, he thought. "I know what it means for a man to believe in something," he said. "Now come on. If we keep on talking we're gonna start getting mad—and then neither one of us will enjoy our vittles."

They crossed the bridge and turned down the road towards the barn, walking companionably together, the mule behind them. Matthew

halted and handed the reins to Crawford. "Wait just a minute," he said. He clambered down the creek bank and fished out two melons he had put in the water at noontime. Their skins were cool and green and smooth under his hands. He tucked one under each arm and went back up the bank. "Harvest finished," he explained. "So I thought we'd have us a water-melon feast before supper tonight. Here, you carry one and I'll carry the other."

They were easy and friendly together, Crawford realized; otherwise Matthew would never have given him part of the burden. At the barn, they deposited the melons in a mule trough while Matthew turned the mule into the pasture. Then they went on to the house, into the front yard where the shade of the big oak sheltered them from the sun. Matthew raised his voice. "I got me water-melons out here," he yelled. "Who wants a slice?"

There was a sudden scurry of noise and Miss Hattie burst out of the kitchen like a flock of quail. "Daddy!" she hollered. "Water-melon!"

"Whoa, now," Matthew said, catching her up. "Wait till the rest get here. Where are the boys?"

"Down at the swimming hole," Miss Hattie said. Her feet clawed for the ground. "I'll go and get 'em."

Matthew released her. "Go on, then," he said. He turned to Crawford. "Set down and cool off. A hot man ain't got no business eating a cold water-melon."

But Crawford was looking at Arlis, coming from the kitchen with knives and spoons and a couple of salt shakers. Her apron had flour streaked on it, her hair was falling down on one side, but her good-humoured, high-coloured, tilted-eyed face appealed to him and he liked the way she walked, vigorously, yet with a delicate grace. She paused, startled, when she saw the stranger. When she came on, her walk changed, became more prim and inhibited.

"Arlis," Matthew said. "This is Crawford Gates. He's come to take supper with us."

Arlis stopped, flustered. "Pleased to meet you," she said. She looked at Matthew reproachfully. "If I'd known you was having folks to supper, I'd have killed a chicken."

Matthew laughed. "No fried chicken," he said to Crawford. "Reckon you can stand it?"

"I reckon so," Crawford said, laughing too.

Matthew put his hand on Arlis's shoulder. "Arlis is my girl," he said. "She's run this house since she was fifteen years old—ever since her Maw died."

Arlis shook away from him, embarrassed. "I've been baking bread all day," she said. "I was aiming for a pot-luck supper tonight, with the boys going to the dance and all. I hope you won't mind, Mr. Gates."

"Suits me fine," Crawford said gallantly. "Anything you want to put on the table is all right with me."

They heard a whooping from the direction of the creek and turned in time to see the boys come boiling out of the underbrush. Knox was in front, trailing a pair of overalls from one hand, and Rice was chasing him, wearing only shorts and a shirt. Miss Hattie capered after them, screaming and shrill with excitement. Suddenly Knox dropped to the ground and Rice ran over him, tumbling into the dust of the road. Knox rose, his hands full of dust, throwing it at Rice's wet body. Rice squalled and began throwing it back until it looked like a rooster fight in the middle of the road.

"I reckon that bath ain't going to do them boys much good," Matthew said. He lifted his voice. "Get your clothes on, boys. We've got company." They sobered instantly, and Rice hastily slipped on his overalls. They came on to the house, and Crawford liked the natural dignity with which they greeted him. It was something all this family had, especially Arlis, a sureness of function and belonging that Crawford himself had never owned.

"All right," Matthew said. "You boys get a couple of trestles and some planks. I want to cut these melons before they get all hot again."

Jesse John hurried into the house to get Connie. She was sitting in front of the mirror, still wearing the slip. "We're cutting a water-melon, Connie," Jesse John said, looking anxiously into her reflected face for her mood. "Come on out."

Connie did not turn. "I don't aim to get all sticky with water-melon juice," she said. "You-all go on."

"But they're waiting on us," Jesse John said.

"I've still got some getting-ready to do," Connie said sharply. "Hurry on and eat your old water-melon. I want you to wear a tie to that dance tonight."

Jesse John looked at her despairingly. "Honey," he said. "I kinda aimed to stay and help Papa with the night work."

She turned round. "No," she said flatly. "Arlis and Miss Hattie can help your daddy. I've been waiting on this dance too long to miss out on it now."

"But honey . . ." He stopped, his voice capitulating. He went towards her, lifting her from the bench and taking her in his arms. "You're gonna be the prettiest girl there tonight," he said.

She smiled and kissed him, quickly. "Now hurry," she said, pushing him away.

He turned and went out of the room reluctantly, looking back at her. She was in front of the mirror again, looking at herself. But he had bought her the mirror, with his own cotton money. He smiled and went on.

In the yard, Matthew was deftly slicing the melons. They were so ripe that the red, glistening meat separated almost of itself. Picking up one of the slices, Matthew proffered it to Crawford Gates with grave ceremony, and then handed slices to Arlis and the boys. "Where's Connie?" he asked Jesse John.

"She doesn't want any," Jesse John said quickly.

Matthew frowned slightly. He went on with the serving, handing a slice with a lot of heart meat to Miss Hattie last of all.

The boys were sitting on the roots of the oak tree, holding the melon in both hands, biting the meat out with their teeth. Miss Hattie sat beside Arlis on the porch steps, wielding a dainty spoon, though she wanted to eat it the way the boys did. But, after all, she was twelve years old, and here was this handsome stranger.

Matthew did not touch his slice as yet. He picked up the other one and walked through the passageway to Connie's and Jesse John's room. He stopped in the doorway, looking at her.

"You're missing out on some mighty good water-melon," he said.



She whirled round, flustered. In Matthew's presence she was ashamed of the thin slip she was wearing. "I . . ." she said, faltering. "I don't care for any, Mr. Dunbar."

"Come on now," he said gently. "This is a celebration." He went into the room and put the water-melon slice on the dressing-table. "Get dressed," he said. "And come on out." He turned and went towards the door. "Is Jesse John taking you to the dance tonight?"

"Yes," she said. "He said he wanted to take me."

Matthew nodded and went on. He stopped at the living-room and looked in. The old man was sitting over the tiny midsummer flicker of fire in a worn rocking-chair, his thin, blotched hands folded in his lap. The room was sparsely furnished with rockers and straight chairs and a single bed in one corner where the old man slept. Matthew stopped beside his chair and looked down at him. He raised his voice. "How are you, Papa?" he said.

For a long moment the old man did not move. His face was thin, fragile, as was his whole body, his bones light and brittle as dry sticks.

"All right, I reckon," the thin voice quivered. It was the faintest possible vibration and Matthew had to bend to hear him. The voice stopped and Matthew listened to the sharp taut shallow panting of the lungs.

He had known this man, his father, in the prime, when his body too had been heavy with muscle and life. And this thin, weak voice had been the voice that had laid the burden, the accomplishment, of Dunbar's Cove upon him. He leaned closer, raising his voice still more. "Papa," he said. "They're trying to buy Dunbar's Cove. They want to take the cove away from me."

But the face had turned away, the milky blue eyes searching again for the light of the flame. The old man had not heard. Matthew stood looking at him for a moment, then he went outside again.

"Aw," Knox was saying to Arlis. "You can go one time. I can't remember when you've been to a dance."

"I've got too much to do," Arlis said. "All the dishes, and cleaning up. It's just too much trouble to go."

"Arlis," Miss Hattie said mischievously. "You said yourself that baking good bread wasn't enough."

"Miss Priss!" Arlis turned on her. "You just shut up."

"Arlis," Crawford said suddenly. "I wish you'd let me take you to the dance."

She looked at him, a flush rising in her face. She liked his looks, but she had not thought of him as a dance partner, as someone to talk and laugh with. He was her father's guest.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have too much . . ."

"Oh, go on, Arlis," Miss Hattie said briskly. "I'll do the dishes and all."

Matthew smiled as he ate his water-melon. Arlis was trapped now, not so much by Crawford as by Miss Hattie.

Suddenly, she wanted to go with Crawford to the dance. "Well," she said. "If it's all right with Papa . . ."

"Go right on for all of me," Matthew said, and it was done.

"What's your line of work, Mr. Gates?" Knox said.

Crawford glanced at Matthew as though asking how much he should tell. "I work for the T.V.A.," he said.

Matthew looked round at each of them in turn. "Crawford is a land buyer," he said. "He come to tell me that the T.V.A. wants to buy the cove. They want to back dam water up here and make a lake out of it."

He watched the words sound into them. Miss Hattie sat on the top step, eating her melon, not really listening. Arlis was still looking at Crawford, wondering how it was going to feel to be held dancing in his strong, wiry arms.

Knox stood up. "Are they really going to build that dam?" he said eagerly. "You think I could get me a job down there? I hear the T.V. and A. pays mighty good money."

Rice was sitting still, watching Matthew. "Buy the cove?" His voice was stunned, unbelieving. "How much would they pay?"

Matthew turned away from him to look at Jesse John. But Jesse John was watching Connie come tripping carefully from the house in a white organdie dress.

"Hello, everybody," she said brightly. "My, it's fun to have a water-melon feast."

Matthew put down his unfinished water-melon. "If I'm going to do

all the night work by myself," he said, "I'd better get started before supper."

He walked away from them and went round the house to the solitude of the barn, the company of the animals.

Chapter 2

THE HOUSE where the dance was being held stood on a knob of hill.

It was owned by Old Man Precise, who also owned a fiddle and three sons and three daughters, all of whom could make music. With their instruments encased in clean flour sacks the old man and the boys would ride anywhere within reach on their mules to play for a dance or a wedding or an all-day-singing-with-dinner-on-the-ground. When there weren't any dances held elsewhere, Old Man Precise would call one at his own house, and play for nothing. He just liked to fiddle, better than he liked anything else, even corn whisky. If a fight started at a dance the first sight to be seen would be Old Man Precise taking his fiddle to safety through the nearest window, followed closely by the Precise boys carrying their guitar, banjo and double-bass.

This was a peaceful dance, though; it was the first since spring ploughing had begun and everybody was intent on enjoyment. In the darkness outside, under the cedar trees near the barn, a group of boys stood, as always, but laughing, not fighting, contesting against each other as they did at times. Inside the house, the living-room was bare of furniture, the splintery pine floor bare too, and the wood thumped and trembled from the rhythmic weight of many feet. There were straight chairs lined round the walls, occupied by old ladies who kept an eye on the girls. Many an old lady had an unconsciously tapping foot in memory of her dancing days.

And over it all, inside the house and out, was the music. Old Man Precise's fiddle sang and sobbed and chirped the songs, his gnarled, blunt fingers delicate as birds on the strings, the double-bass thumping the beat behind him, the banjo plucking busily, the guitar mellow and slow. Old Man Precise stood erect as he played, and his white-

moustached, blue-eyed face beamed benevolently. He always liked to see the young folk having a good time.

For Rice, it was beyond a good time; he was walking in a world of his own tonight, dancing with red-headed Charlene.

"Charlene," he said. "You're the purtiest girl here tonight."

She looked up at him with her candid blue eyes. "Of course I am," she said. "You're not telling me a thing, Rice Dunbar."

He blushed at the directness of her eyes. He didn't dare pull her close to him, as he wanted to. "Charlene," he said. And then he didn't know what to say, for he couldn't say what was in his mind. "You're the purtiest——"

She laughed. "Silly. You've already said that once. Now, quit talking and dance."

Arlis said to Crawford, "Look at Rice and that red-headed girl. He's got it bad, hasn't he?"

Crawford looked, and grinned. "Yes," he said. "But not much worse than me. He's just younger about it, that's all."

"How much younger?" Arlis said.

"I'm twenty-nine," Crawford said. "How old are you, Arlis?"

Arlis thought about it for a moment, her feet moving automatically with the music. She was twenty. But from fifteen to twenty she had missed the carefreeness of the age because of the kitchen and the work, the necessity of holding the family together as her mother had in her lifetime. So she was older than twenty and, at the same time, younger. She had not had the dancing and the fun and the experience with men that girls of that age know, learning to talk and laugh and hold it all on the level of non-meaning.

"You shouldn't ask any girl how old she is," she protested.

He looked into her eyes. "Twenty-three? Twenty-two?"

She felt a stab of hurt. "Twenty," she said quickly, and she saw the change in his face as he realized his mistake.

The music stopped and Old Man Precise called out, "I want me an old-timey square-dance set. Choose your partners."

Crawford wiped his face. "I don't think I'd better risk it," he said. "I don't know how to square-dance."

"Let's just watch then," Arlis said comfortably.

"Want to go outside for a breath of fresh air?"

"Oh, no," Arlis said. Her resentment flowed, then ebbed as she realized he did not know that going outside during a dance could ruin a girl for ever—especially with a stranger. "We can move over by the window, though."

The music started, "Under the Double Eagle," gay and foot-stirring. Cool air poured in from the night outside as they stood in the open window and Arlis slipped her arm comfortably through Crawford's, looking round the room.

The square-dance set lined down the whole length. She watched, smiling, as Rice did some fancy steps in the middle of the set, on his way to Charlene. Some of the boys might be drinking outside; but Rice didn't need the lift of whisky. She looked for Connie and Jesse John, planning to go to talk to them, but Connie was sitting alone against the wall in her white organdie, a look of discontent on her face. As she watched, she saw Connie get up and slip out of the side door. She frowned. Connie was up to something.

In the porch, Connie hesitated, looking through the darkness towards the young men under the cedars, daring herself to approach them. She could see cigarettes glowing, hear quiet laughter, and she knew Jesse John was there, having a drink.

Her foot was tapping to the beat of the music and she stopped it, deliberately, annoyed. Dancing had been a wonder to Connie ever since she was twelve years old. At every dance she anticipated breathlessly something special and exciting coming to her out of the music and the night and the men's arms round her. It was an inner excitement, a response, she had sought with insatiable delight. But it did not happen any longer. She came with Jesse John, she danced with Jesse John, she went home with Jesse John. The younger boys were reluctant to cut in on her, now that she was married, and she knew that the old women disapproved of her dancing at all. And now Jesse John went off to drink with the men outside, where no respectable woman could follow. But tonight she was going to.

She saw Knox coming towards her from the darkness, walking up

the hill to the porch. *We are alone*, she thought, and she looked quickly behind her to make sure the porch was empty.

"Knox," she said. "Have you seen Jesse John?"

He stopped, one foot on the step, and looked up at her warily.

"No," he said. "Went to get himself a drink, I reckon."

Connie put one hand on the porch column and lifted a foot, swinging lightly on the other. "He left me setting in there like an old lady," she said, a pout in her voice. But she did not really care any more. She looked at Knox boldly across the darkness. "Why don't you come and dance with me, Knox?"

"I reckon not, Connie," he said. "I'm not much to dance."

She listened to the carefulness of his voice. She moved down a step nearer to him. "I remember when you liked to dance with me," she said.

Knox stepped down to the hard-packed earth of the yard, away from her. "That was before you married my brother," he said. He was afraid she was going to touch him, and he turned quickly away. "If I see Jesse John, I'll tell him you're looking for him."

"Yes," she said, keeping the tremble out of her voice. "You do that, Knox." She turned and fled into the dance again.

Knox walked quickly towards the group under the cedars. He was shaken. Nearly always he managed to keep people between them; only once in a seldom while were they ever alone for even a moment. Connie had been his a few summer nights, over three years ago. But she persisted in bringing it up, even though she was married now to Jesse John. *Why*, his mind fretted, *why are women like that?*

"Howdy, Knox," a voice said as he joined the group. "Take a little snort."

"Carrying my own, thank you." Knox took out the bottle and tilted it. "Anybody care for a swallow?" The voices murmured and he put the bottle away. "Jesse John here?" he said.

"Here," Jesse John said.

"Connie's looking for you."

"I was just going to see about her," Jesse John said, moving reluctantly away. Voices reached out laughing after him. "Go on now, your wife's calling." "That's all right, Jesse John, you stay here and *I'll* go."

Knox leaned against a tree, rolling a cigarette.

"T.V.A. visited you-all yet?" Red Johnson asked him.

"A man came today," Knox said. "Wanted to buy us out."

"Us too," Red said. "Last week. Your daddy gonna sell?"

"I don't think so. Papa don't like it at all."

"I reckon he'd better get himself a tall pair of hip boots then," another voice said. "That water's gonna get mighty deep."

They all laughed. Knox frowned, thinking about something else. "What about that dam?" he said. "They hiring folks to go to work there yet?"

"I heard they're hiring," John Roberts said. "I heard you go into town and fill in papers and take all sorts of tests." He snorted. "Just to find out if you know how to swing an axe."

"I reckon I can fill in them papers as handy as the next man," Red Johnson said. "I hear they pay mighty good money."

"Yeah." Knox stretched. "That's what I hear too. I'd like to make some of that money." He settled back against the tree. He knew how Matthew felt about public work; many's the time he'd heard him laugh at folks leaving good farms to work by the day for cash money. But still . . . to have money in his pocket—a car—strange women instead of the girls he'd grown up with . . . After all, he was twenty-four years old and he wasn't tied down to a pretty organdie dress like Jesse John. Knox leaned against the tree, thinking. Rice came out once, stayed for a quick cigarette, and went away.

"You'd better hurry, Rice," Red called after him. "Somebody's gonna run off with Charlene."

Rice blushed in the darkness and hurried on. He was going to kiss her tonight, he told himself. He'd made up his mind; he would get her to leave the dance early, so that they would have a slower walk home.

Inside, Jesse John and Connie were dancing now, and Connie watched Rice over Jesse John's shoulder as he led out Charlene. That was the way she had felt once, long ago, and most of it had been Knox. Knox was a secret in her mind she had never told anyone. She closed her eyes, wishing Jesse John away from her, wishing Knox in his place. Then she opened her eyes suddenly. She knew now that a dance would never be

the same wonder to her that it had been before. She stopped and Jesse John stumbled against her. "I'm tired of dancing," she said. "Let's go home."

Astonished, Jesse John said anxiously, "Do you feel bad, Connie?"

She looked at him, wanting to tell him the truth, wanting to hurt him. Instead she smiled, and pressed his arm. "Let's go home, Jesse John. Before the others get there."

He brightened at the promise in her voice.

Knox stayed with the group for a time, then he drifted to the house and looked in a window at the whirling throng for a few minutes. But he discovered he did not want to go inside and went instead to the grove where his mule was hitched. He inspected the saddle girth just in case some fun-loving friend had cut it almost in two with a sharp pocket-knife. Then he swung into the saddle and headed home at a sharp lope, sitting slouched on one thigh above the lengthening, surging movement of the mule. At home he walked round to the front porch to smoke a final cigarette before going to bed.

"Home so early?" Matthew's voice said near him from the darkness. "What's the matter at that dance? Jesse John and Connie come in a while ago."

"Oh," Knox said. "It was just an old dance."

Matthew chuckled. "I've seen you ride twenty miles to one of them old dances, even knowing you had to hit the field at daylight."

Knox sat down on the porch. "I reckon you grow out of it," he said. He rolled a cigarette. "Papa," he said. "I been thinking. Now we got the crop harvested, I think I'll go down to that dam and see if I can't find me a job of work."

He listened to the following silence. It was long and empty between them.

"Why do you want to do that?" Matthew said finally.

"It's good money."

Matthew stirred in his chair. The moon was beginning to come up over the trees and he could see Knox's white face in the darkness. He had felt this coming in Knox, from far back, the restlessness, the undependability. "It ain't never been necessary for a Dunbar to go out

to public work," he said quietly. "If you need money, I'll put money in your hand. How much do you want?"

Knox moved, jerkily. "It's not just that. I want to make it myself, and know I made it with the sweat of my body."

Matthew laughed. But it was not an easy laughter. "You think you didn't make it here?"

"It's not the same." Knox sat still, firming his mind for a moment. "I want to go, Papa. Tomorrow. Do you say I can go?"

Matthew watched him. "I'd rather you didn't," he said slowly. "You're your own man. But I'd still rather you didn't."

They sat still, for the length of a cigarette. Finally Knox stood up.

"Going to bed, son?" Matthew said mildly.

Knox looked across the darkness, milky now with moonlight, at his father. He knew he wouldn't leave tomorrow.

"No sir," he said. "I think I'll go back to the dance and find me a girl. I didn't use that dance right tonight."

He walked quickly away, leaving Matthew sitting alone again. After a while Matthew heard the mule's hoofs pass quickly away, and he sighed. He had won tonight. But he wondered how long he could keep on winning. Maybe Knox, too, would one day disappear between the dark and the daylight, as Matthew's brother Mark had disappeared. After a while he got up and went into his lonely front bedroom, undressed and lay down on the bed. But he did not sleep for a long time.

KNOX WAS MOVING at a hard gallop when he passed Rice and Charlene on the road. He waved a hand at them, and yelled, his voice splitting down the wind behind him. Rice stared. "I wonder where *he's* going in such a hurry?" he said.

"Who cares?" Charlene said languidly.

They were walking very slowly, arm in arm, Rice leading his mule behind them. It was too near to Charlene's house from the Precise place, and nearly all the distance had been eaten up.

"Charlene," Rice said breathlessly. He turned her to face him. Car headlights came towards them and they drew apart, walking on, while the car with Arlis and Crawford passed them. For Rice's money, there

was too much traffic on this road tonight. He stopped, looking at her again, turning her towards him. He kissed her, eagerly, first without putting his arms round her, then holding her close. They kissed for a long silvery minute in the moonlight and he could feel the full length of her body against him. He put one hand on her breast, almost involuntarily, and she drew away. He felt the sting of her palm on his cheek.

"You just keep your hands to yourself, Mr. Rice," she said tartly.

He put his hand on his cheek, flustered. He reached for her again but she was not there.

"I've got to get on home," she said, moving away, leaving him to hurry after. "Just because I kissed you once . . ."

"Charlene," he said. "I'm . . . I . . ."

She stopped and waited for him. "All right," she said, relenting. "But don't you never try . . . that . . . again."

He had recovered his balance by now. "Never?" he said, grinning. "Never is a long time, Charlene."

She softened. "All right. Don't do it again tonight, then."

After a while he kissed her again. Then they crept even more slowly towards the parting.

CRAWFORD stopped the car under the trees at the head of the cove. "Let's walk the rest of the way," he said.

"All right," Arlis said. She looked up at the moon shivering through the tree branches over their head. It was dark here, where they sat, and she did not want to go into the house yet. She hunted in her mind for something to talk about. "Crawford," she said, "what are you and the T.V.A. going to do about the cove?"

"We're going to buy it. We have to, Arlis. Your father is going to have to see it sooner or later. I hope it's sooner."

"We've lived here a long time. It'd be strange, somewhere else."

"I guess it will be." Crawford's voice was understanding. He picked up her hand, lacing her fingers carefully with his own. "I've always lived a footless kind of life, but I can guess how it would be."

She let him keep her hand. "Crawford," she said. "Don't hurry him. Let him make up his own mind to it."

"We'll give him all the time we can," he said. "That's the way the T.V.A. does business."

"I've got to go in now," she said. "I've enjoyed the dance."

He got out, came round to her side, and took her arm as she stepped out. Moving slowly, they started towards the house. "Arlis," Crawford said. He was almost afraid to say the words. "Me being with the T.V.A. and coming to buy your father out . . . it won't make any difference between me and you, will it?"

"Difference?" she said.

"I want to come back to see you, I mean. I want to . . ."

She hesitated. Then she said slowly, "If you're working round here, I reckon you'll be welcome at our house."

"I will be," he said happily. "I'll be working in this area for a long time to come."

They didn't say anything further, but their pace was slow and timed and together down the unmade road. The moonlight flooded them and the night was cool. They could hear frogs talking from the creek and from somewhere came the sudden startling scream of a screech-owl. Arlis flinched and gripped his arm, though she had been hearing screech-owls all her life. At the steps to the porch they stopped. "Good night," Arlis said, her voice muted.

"Good night, Arlis," Crawford said softly.

It was a clumsy, ill-timed kiss, for he had not known he was going to do it and she was not prepared for his boldness. But it was a strangely satisfactory kiss. She drew away quickly and went up the steps. "Good night," she said, pushing the words through her tight throat.

"I'll be back to see you," he said. "Soon." He turned and walked quickly away, and Arlis went shaken into the dark house.

VISTA: *Young Men at Work*

T.V.A.—born in the teens of the century; accomplished in the thirties. The men who dreamed it, designed it, built it, were so young they seemed slightly ridiculous going about the job clothed in bright khaki

and few years. But they knew a great truth: each yard of concrete poured is an accomplishment, a reality. The young men poured their concrete with the knowledge that they were building for the centuries.

They swarmed over the land like benevolent locusts, these young men, planting instead of destroying, talking and questioning and filling in the intricate forms. The inhabitants stood back in astonishment and awe, and the young men were bright and quick and self-assured as two-year-old children at play.

They laid prices on land that had never been priced before, out of scant experience and complicated instructions from other young men in offices far away. They surveyed and measured and drilled test cores when the only surveying and measuring and drilling they had ever done before had been academic exercises.

The wonder is not that they did it, but that they did it so well. They learned the land as it had never been learned before; they mapped and taped and drilled it, they measured the contours and the population and the consumption of vitamin A. And, most of all, they knew how to build dams—and they built them.

Chickasaw Dam. They studied the possible sites, the hydrology and meteorology, the stream flow, the flood flows, the tailwater and headwater, flood control and navigation. They laid out the project and estimated costs, they made social and economic studies, and they started building.

This is the way to build a dream and a reality: handle approximately 352,000 cubic yards of earth excavation, 186,000 cubic yards of rock excavation, and put in its place, shaped and formed, 837,000 cubic yards of earth fill and 297,000 cubic yards of concrete. But before you can do that you must survey and map 217,000 acres of land, and while you're doing the excavating you must buy 110,145 acres of land—and you must also move one thousand one hundred and eighty-two families and clear 24,426 acres of woodland—and don't forget to relocate the cemeteries, highways and bridges, not to mention the railway and power lines, the telephone and telegraph lines. And whatever you do, don't forget the dead and the living; the human.

Now the work at Chicksaw is beginning; the concrete, the earth and

the people are being moved on a schedule constructed out of dream and hope and the beginning of knowledge, with an invisible legend—YOUNG MEN AT WORK—like a road sign beside them.

Chapter 3

HERE WAS no seeming change in Dunbar's Cove when the new morning came. The chickens rolled in the dust, the guineas ranged the thicket in the way of guineas, and Connie lay abed and sleeping long after the sounds of breakfast had ceased.

The men went off into the woods with crosscut saws and axes to begin the cording up of winter wood, led by Matthew Dunbar who picked the trees and cleared round them. Rice and Knox were happy, stooped over the crosscut trying to saw each other down, working with quick whipping jerks of the saw. Matthew paused in his work to look at Knox for any change, any remembering from last night. But it was apparently gone out of him, and he was the same as ever.

In the house, Arlis moved about dusting, wondering how long it would be before Crawford Gates paid another visit to the cove. Almost involuntarily she stooped to look out of the front window towards the creek road. It was empty in the bright sunlight. She sighed and went back to the dusting, hurrying to finish so that she could get the dishes washed. If it depended on Connie, they'd still be dirty come dinnertime.

Only Miss Hattie was unhappy. She had been very careful to lock the corn-crib door behind her before she took off the dress and the flimsy pants. She looked at herself carefully, with the same searching attention that Connie gave to her face in the mirror. At last she gave up and picked up the dress again. She took one last long look at herself, even putting her hands flat on her chest and pressing hard. But there was no difference from yesterday.

She slipped the cotton dress over her head and stooped to put on her pants. Then she looked cautiously out into the barn-yard. It was empty. Coming out of the crib, she walked slowly into the back yard. She paused, looking towards the guinea thicket, suddenly wanting to play

there again today. But she couldn't. Not now. Last year, when she had played there, had belonged to a Miss Hattie who no longer existed now in this summer's day and time.

She went on, her head bowed. The porch was a sudden coolness after the hot direct blast of morning sun and the kitchen was cool, too. She sat down at the table and stared moodily at Arlis without saying a word, observing how happy and bustling she was in her work. That Crawford, she thought. Her and that Crawford.

Arlis turned round, finally, disturbed by Miss Hattie's stillness, and saw the sombreness of her face and eyes. "What's the matter with you?" she said.

Miss Hattie looked away. "Nothing," she said glumly.

Arlis shook the dish-water from her hands and went to the table, leaning over to see into her face. "Come on now," she said. "Tell Arlis what's the trouble."

Miss Hattie studied her grubby hands. "Why do women have to do it all?" she said grudgingly. "Why is it all put on the women?"

Arlis was startled. She began to laugh, then she stopped abruptly. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about women," Miss Hattie said defiantly. "They've got it all, all the hurting and everything, and the men just have a good time. It ain't fair."

Arlis went back to the dish-pan so that Miss Hattie wouldn't see her face, thinking about what she was going to say, wondering why in creation Miss Hattie had brought up this subject now. "I reckon it's just the way God made things," she said carefully. "Anyway, it don't do no good to holler against it, Miss Hattie. You'll find that out."

"But it ain't fair," Miss Hattie said again. There was a mixture of shame and belligerence in her voice. "I don't want to be no woman, and I ain't going to be. I ain't going to have no part of it."

"I don't know a whole lot you can do about it," Arlis said dryly. She turned round again, looking at Miss Hattie. She was sitting on the chair, her legs together, her hands folded in her lap. Her body was rigid, stiff. Lord, Arlis thought suddenly. She went to Miss Hattie's side and put her arm round her shoulders. "Don't you worry about it, honey,"

she said softly. "You'll like being a woman. You'll see. You'll like it."

Miss Hattie's shoulders were as rigid as a board, and Arlis saw that she was pale, her usually bright eyes dulled with rebellion.

"I don't want no part of it, thank you," Miss Hattie said, her voice as firm as her shoulders. She turned her head. "I believe I'll just say, No thank you ma'am."

Arlis peered into Miss Hattie's face. "What's the matter, Miss Hattie?" she said. "Tell me what's the matter."

Miss Hattie turned away from her. Her face flamed. Then she looked back at Arlis, belligerently.

"I got the cramps," she said. "I got the darned old cramps."

Arlis leaned back, laughing. Relief made her laugh the harder. "Good lord, child, you scared me to death," she said. "I thought you and some boy had . . ." She stopped, holding the laughing in. "I know, honey, I know how it is."

"It just ain't fair," Miss Hattie muttered. "Them boys just walk about and . . ."

"You know what to do?" Arlis said briskly.

"I reckon so," Miss Hattie admitted stiffly.

"All right. You go on in there. You'll find what you need in the bottom drawer of my dressing-table. Go on, now."

She kept busy until Miss Hattie came back into the kitchen. She was washing dishes, her hands busy and happy in the sudsy water, and she hummed under her breath while she worked. It was one of the tunes they had danced to last night; she was not much of a one to sing, because she couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, but any girl has a right to hum her happiness.

When Miss Hattie re-entered the room Arlis looked quickly at her and then away. Miss Hattie was feeling better now. She'd just had to talk about it, get the resentment out into words. Arlis racked the last plate and picked up the dish-pan. She went to the back door and threw the soapy water out into the yard, sending a cluster of hens flying, and came back to the kitchen. "You want some sugar and butter on a piece of bread?" she said.

"No. I don't believe I want anything to eat."

Arlis looked at her closely. "You feeling all right?"

"Sure," Miss Hattie said. "I feel fine."

Arlis sat down at the table. "Now listen to me," she said sternly. "You're a woman now. You understand what that means?"

"You don't have to worry about me," Miss Hattie said resentfully. "I don't want nothing to do with being a woman."

Arlis's voice softened. "There'll come times when you'll want to," she said. "Maybe not for a while. But later on, there'll come a wanting like you've never had before. That's when you've got to understand how a woman can't be careless and uncaring the way a man is."

"Arlis," Miss Hattie said. "What's it like? What's it really like?"

Arlis drew back. "Why don't you ask Connie?" she said.

"I mean, you and Crawford," Miss Hattie said eagerly, unlistening.

Arlis stood up angrily. "What in the world are you talking about?" she said. "What do you think your sister is, anyway?"

"You never did sleep very good last night," Miss Hattie said. "You kept me awake half the night, moaning and tossing in your sleep. You wanted to, didn't you?"

Arlis went blindly to the stove, rattling the lids. "Wanting is one thing and doing is another," she snapped. She couldn't tell Miss Hattie what it was like, even if she'd wanted to. She didn't really know herself. "Honey," she said, "I went dancing with Crawford Gates once. He kissed me good night. But that didn't give me no nightmares, even if I did keep you awake."

"I'm sorry," Miss Hattie mumbled. "I didn't mean . . ." She looked up at Arlis. "That's the kind of wanting you was talking about? Wanting to dance with a man, be kissed by him?"

"Yes," Arlis said steadily. "That. And more than that."

Miss Hattie frowned. "Connie," she said. "It looks like she's still got that wanting, too, the way she carries on. Why ain't she satisfied and content, now she's got her man?"

Arlis slammed another stove lid. "Some people just can't be satisfied," she said. "Some people would keep on looking if they was married to the President of the United States."

"Maybe, women being peculiar like they are, it ain't just any man,"

Miss Hattie said thoughtfully. "Maybe it's just one particular man."

Arlis felt relieved. "That's the way it is," she said quickly. "You keep on waiting until you're sure it's that one particular man, and you'll be all right."

"Yes," Miss Hattie said thoughtfully. "And that means Jesse John ain't the one particular for Connie." She thought about it, her face scowling and intent. "I've been doing Connie an injustice. I should have been feeling sorry for that woman. Because now she ain't never going to have no chance to find him."

"What about Jesse John? You ought to feel sorry for him."

"No," Miss Hattie said, shaking her head. "Course, it ain't his fault, neither. But Connie is the one." She smiled, slightly. "I reckon from now on I'll speak more kindly to her," she said. "And you ought to, too, Arlis. Why, you even grudge her a place at the table."

"Not for that reason," Arlis said. "Because she ain't no help round the house. That's all I got against her. Now, get on out and play."

Miss Hattie stood up.

"Don't go climbing no trees," Arlis warned.

Miss Hattie glared back. "I still say it ain't fair," she said. "Why, I've been climbing trees since I was born and now all of a sudden I can't do it no more." She slammed the screen door viciously behind her as she went out.

Arlis looked after her for a moment, shaking her head, wanting to laugh and cry at the same time. *It comes to us all*, she thought. *It comes to us all*. She found herself remembering the feel of Crawford's arms round her while they danced. Then she shook the feeling away from her by stepping out on the back porch to get a look at the sun. It would be time to start dinner before long. She lingered a moment before she went back to her work. It was a good day, hot and still. She felt as though something good was going to happen to her on this good day. Maybe Crawford would come, after all.

CRAWFORD GATES studied his boss, Mr. Hansen, sitting on the other side of the desk, then he dropped his eyes to the papers in his lap.

"That's it," he said. "I'm going to see Mr. Dunbar again today."

Hansen leaned back in his swivel-chair. "What do you think?" he said. "Is he holding out for more money?"

Crawford was putting the papers away in folders. "No, sir," he said. "Not Matthew Dunbar. He just doesn't want to move. Now, Asa Proctor is a different story. He thinks he can get more money than we're offering. He'll hold out until we move condemnation proceedings against him, then he'll come to terms."

"Is Dunbar against the whole idea of T.V.A.?"

Crawford shook his head. "No. I'd say he doesn't care, one way or the other. He wants to keep his land, that's all. It's been in the family for a long time." Crawford stood up. "You really can't blame him. It's a mighty pretty cove he's got. If I had it, I'm afraid I'd feel the same way."

Hansen smiled. "Whose side are you on, his or the T.V.A.'s?"

"I want to make both sides the same. Make old Matthew understand the real thing about T.V.A., how he and his cove don't have the right to stand in its way. That's the way I aim to handle it. I think it's the best way."

Hansen pursed his lips. "There's always recourse to condemnation."

"Sure," Crawford said. "But we've got time. They're not going to get that dam finished tomorrow. And I'll tell you one thing: I'd rather have Matthew Dunbar on my side than against me. If he gets his stubbornness up, he could give us a lot of trouble."

"Do you think you can handle it?"

"I think so," Crawford said soberly. "And when I change my mind about that, I'll come and tell you."

Hansen turned back to his papers. "You know how we operate," he said. "We'd rather have a friend of the T.V.A. any time, instead of an enemy. Go to it."

"I'm taking the map and the forms out there today." Crawford walked to the door, then hesitated. "I reckon there's one more thing I ought to tell you." His voice stiffened with embarrassment. "I'm going to be calling on his daughter. I had supper there last night."

Hansen looked up again from the papers. "Just don't forget who you're working for," he said.

Crawford smiled with relief. "I won't. You can depend on that." After a moment he went on out of the room.

He walked down the old dusty stairs and into the sunlight outside, blinking his eyes. The Land Acquisition Office had been set up in the nearest small town to the area and he stood now in the square in front of the bank building where the T.V.A. had rented upstairs space. He went across the street to his car. It was very hot from standing in the sun and he was sweating by the time he got it into motion. He wheeled round the square, and took a street leading out. The road ended very quickly and he was on gravel, dusting up behind the car in long lazy swirls. The cotton along the roadside was deep green under spun dust from the road. He crossed the bridge over the river, and took an unmade road along the river bank.

Until then he had not thought about her. Now he said *Arlis* in his mind, the name bringing the warmth and goodness of last night. He began to drive faster, wanting to get there.

He spun out of trees into cotton fields, then back into trees again. Then, abruptly, unexpectedly, the trees ended in a slashed line. This had not been here yesterday. He looked round, startled for a moment, and then he saw a crew of about fifty men working back from the road with saws and axes and brush-hooks.

He stopped the car, watching them. Between them and the road was a cleared space of downed trees, the limbs lopped off and piled for drying and burning, the naked logs left lying for the moment. This was only secondary growth, spindling pine and hardwood and sweet gum, but the cutting and clearing had made the land look ungodly open and naked against the light. Clearing the reservoir, he thought, watching the figures at work. Most of them would be locals, he knew, hired after the harvest. It would be good and unexpected money in their pockets.

He drove on, and in a few minutes stopped in the shade of the trees at the head of the cove. Taking the folder, feeling the excitement of *Arlis* stirring in him, he walked rapidly up the road to the house. But the front yard and the porch were empty.

At the steps he lifted his voice. "Hello the house."

He waited, listening to the stillness, and heard a door open into the

passageway. He knew it was Arlis before he saw her. She stopped in surprise, and he watched her face, wondering what she was feeling. "Hello, Arlis," he said.

"Crawford," she said. Her face looked flushed and pleased. "I didn't expect you back so soon."

He wanted to move up the steps to her side, to touch her. "I came to see your daddy," he said. "But it's good seeing you too, Arlis."

It was not at all as she had expected. She had felt that the dancing and the kiss would stand between them, barring communication. But they were easy and casual and friendly in the broad daylight, as though the moonlight had not happened at all.

"He's out in the woods working up the winter wood," she said. "They'll be in to dinner pretty soon. Won't you come in?"

He came up the steps, close to her. "I'll just wait, then."

"I've got some coffee on the stove," she said. "Won't you come into the kitchen?"

He followed her down the passageway, wondering how women did it, seeming so calm, so unaffected by hidden currents, the way no man could be. Like her—calm, and friendly, while he had to force his voice into sedate greeting, all the time wanting to put his arms round her. Maybe last night didn't happen to her, he thought. Maybe it's all gone away now, just a pleasant night like any other.

She opened the door into the kitchen and entered, Crawford behind her. Connie was sitting at the table drinking a cup of coffee, a dirty plate before her. "Good morning, Mr. Gates," she said, seeing him.

"Good morning, Mrs. Dunbar," he said.

"Oh, don't call me Mrs. Dunbar," she said. "Call me Connie." She looked at him appraisingly, then turned her head, standing up. "I've finished, Arlis. Is there anything you want me to do?"

"No," Arlis said. "Don't you want another cup of coffee?"

"I've had plenty," Connie said. She walked out of the room. She was wearing a housecoat over her slip, white with roses flowered on it, and her feet were bare. She did not seem concerned about Crawford watching her.

"Sit down," Arlis said to him. "I'll heat the coffee."

When she brought the coffee, she slipped into the seat opposite him. She was still too far away across the big round table. He felt a sudden stiffness between them.

"Last night," he said. "Did you have a good time?"

She blushed, and he felt better. "Yes," she said. "Yes. It was a good time."

He pressed on. "I hope you didn't mind me, there at the last . . ."

"No. It was all right. I mean . . ."

"I didn't know I was going to," he said. "And then, all of a sudden, I . . ."

She was not looking at him. "It was all right," she said.

He leaned forward. "Arlis," he said. "Before the others get here—I want to ask you . . . I mean, I'm going to the picture show in town on Saturday. You want to go with me?"

She sat very still. *It is real*, she thought. *It really did happen last night and I didn't just imagine it.* "Yes," she said. "Yes, I would like to go."

There was a sound at the screen door and they both turned to see Miss Hattie watching them with startled eyes. She started to come into the room, and then she turned suddenly and ran. They heard her feet going fast across the back porch. They both laughed. "That's Miss Hattie," Arlis said. "I reckon she didn't expect to see you here."

Crawford laughed. "I didn't know I frightened children."

"Oh, you never know what Miss Hattie will do. Next time she might get on your lap. You want another cup of coffee?"

"Please," he said, lifting his cup. She came to stand close beside him while she poured the fresh cup. He wanted to touch her but he was still afraid to.

"You'll take dinner with us?" she said, sitting down again.

He shook his head regretfully. "I'm afraid not. I've got a lot of people to see."

She frowned. "Buying land for the T.V.A.? Is that why you're seeing Papa again?"

"Not today. I just want to make out papers, go over the acreage with him." He smiled. "I'm not going to fight with your daddy today. I hope I don't ever have to fight with him."

"I reckon you know I'm on his side," she said.

He leaned over the table. "There's no this side and that side," he said. "Don't you start thinking that, Arlis."

He stopped, and stood up as Matthew came into the kitchen. "Why, howdy there." Matthew looked at him, surprised. "How was that dance last night?"

"Just fine, Mr. Dunbar. How are you today?"

"Right now, I'm hot and tired," Matthew said. He looked at Arlis. "You got my dinner ready, girl?"

"It's in the warming oven," Arlis said.

"Good. Come on, Crawford. Wash up and eat with us."

"I've already asked him once," Arlis said. "He said he just came to see you for a minute."

Matthew looked at Crawford. "I don't aim to talk to nobody on an empty stomach," he said. "You've got to eat some time, and we've got a God's plenty of vittles. Come on now, and wash up."

"All right," Crawford said. "I thank you."

He followed Matthew out into the yard. The boys were clustered round the well. Crawford and Matthew washed, side by side, Matthew stooping over his pan and splashing the water heartily into his face and over his hands and arms. Then they moved aside to make room for the boys.

"What did you want to see me about?" Matthew said, his eyes sharp on Crawford. "If you aim to talk about buying again——"

"No," Crawford said, "but I'd like to go over your place with you. We've got aerial photographs to measure your land and you can show me just where your lines go on the map. Then we can work out the acreage and everything and make you a price."

"I don't need no price," Matthew said firmly. "So I don't see no need for you to go to all that trouble."

Crawford had to say it exactly right now. "It's just a job I've got to do," he said. He smiled deprecatingly. "They tell me to go out and measure some land, I've got to go out and measure it. It doesn't commit you to anything. It's just helping me to do my job."

"All right," Matthew said at last. "I don't want to get you into no

trouble with your boss. You can measure my land from now to dooms day if you're a mind to." He grinned faintly. "It's gonna take you that long to buy it, anyway, Mr. Gates."

Crawford grinned too. "Then we'll go over it after dinner."

Matthew turned to wink at the boys. "Ain't no telling how many times he's gonna have to come out here and measure this cove, anyway," he said. "Unless he can find some other excuse to see Arlis."

The boys laughed with Matthew. Crawford smiled sheepishly. "You may be right. But don't you tell the T.V.A."

Matthew put a hand on his shoulder. "All right, son," he said. "Let's go and eat before them vittles get cold on us."

The three boys trooped noisily ahead into the house. As soon as they were alone in the back porch, Crawford said quickly, "Mr. Dunbar, I asked Arlis to go to the picture show with me on Saturday night. I hope it's all right with you."

Matthew looked into his face, his eyes bright and seeing. "As long as it suits her." He paused. "Of course, I hope your intentions is good. Arlis has always been a home girl and she——"

Crawford smiled. "If you can't trust me," he said, "you can depend on Arlis."

Matthew nodded. "Yes. You're right about that."

After the hearty meal, Knox and Rice went out in the porch to lie down for a while before going back to the woods. Crawford and Matthew went to the field road that led to the creek, and Crawford took out the aerial map. "Like to see it?" He handed it to Matthew.

Matthew held the map folded out, looking at it. "Here we are," he said, putting his finger on it. He was pleased. "I recognized it right away, even if I ain't never seen it from the air." He smiled shyly. "And I'm on here, somewhere, if you could just see sharp enough. Ain't that something? I wonder where I was working that day."

He gave the map back and they walked down the field road. Crawford looked round. "It's a mighty pretty place, Mr. Dunbar."

"Yes," Matthew said. "Yes, it is. I don't never get over the pretty of it, myself."

They reached the bridge and Crawford stopped, getting out a pad of

forms and filling in a heading. "You've got all this in cotton," he said, moving a finger on the map to indicate. "Is that right?"

"Yes," Matthew said, looking over his shoulder.

Crawford started to write. "You can just about tell from the map itself what's growing," he said. "But we check it. And this is where the corn starts." He turned the pad over and multiplied some figures. "And this here is your boundary line?"

Matthew watched his finger move along the map. "Yes," he said. "I've got a little jog of timberland right here, though." He indicated the place. "That's mine, too."

Swiftly, Crawford altered the line. "I didn't know you went up that far," he said. He smiled. "We were aiming to cheat you there. We were calling that Upchurch's."

They walked on. "I don't know how to explain it to you," Crawford said. "I wish there was some way I could show you the whole T.V.A., like I showed you that map. Then you'd see how big it is, and how right. I'd like to take you down to that dam site some time."

"I'm a busy man, Mr. Gates," Matthew said. "I don't have no time to go gallivanting. This is hay land. Did you get that?"

Crawford stopped, making notes. "You've never had electricity in your house, have you?"

"No," Matthew said. "The power company talked once of putting a line through, but it never did come to nothing. Said it was too expensive, folks lived too far apart through here."

"When T.V.A. gets through, there'll be power lines all through here. Folks will form co-ops and bring it in for themselves."

"Yeah," Matthew said. "But to hear you tell it, I ain't going to be here to enjoy it."

Crawford stopped in the cart track. "Still, you wouldn't want to hold electricity away from all the other folks that live round here, the Proctors and the Sheldons and the Precises and all the rest?"

"No," Matthew said slowly. "I reckon I wouldn't want to do that." He studied the ground. "They're my neighbours. I wouldn't turn a hand to hurt them in any way."

"You don't have to turn a hand," Crawford said bluntly. "All you've

got to do is stand still in your stubbornness. That way, you'll be hurting the whole countryside, holding it back from the progress it needs." He leaned forward. "Listen. Ain't nobody ever done anything for this part of the country. It's just laid here, with a few folks scratching at the soil to make a living. We've got to hurry now to catch up."

Matthew looked into Crawford's face. "I reckon we'd better walk on," he said. "I've got to get back to my wood-cutting."

He started on, Crawford hurrying after him. It's like a stone wall, he thought, anger rising in him. He pushed it down. "Mr. Dunbar," he said. "You ever had malaria? Tell me that."

"Sure," Matthew said. "I've been subject to chills and fever once or twice in my time. Most everybody has, I reckon."

"Did you expect it? Do you expect your family to have it? Did you think there wasn't anything to be done about it?"

Matthew frowned. He liked this earnest boy and he liked the look in Arlis's eyes when she looked at him. But he was something like a mosquito himself, buzzing and talking and annoying a man. "I don't believe I even thought about it," he said. "I got the chills and I took quinine to get rid of it."

"You see?" Crawford said. "You didn't believe there was anything to be done about it. But there is. The T.V.A. is going to get rid of malaria in this country. T.V.A. isn't just power, and navigation and flood control, though God knows that's enough just by itself. It's the whole country. You've seen the gullies in some of the fast-sloping land round here. The T.V.A. is going to see to that, too."

Matthew kept moving. "Did you come out here to look at some land, or did you come to preach at me again? I'll tell you one thing, son. T.V.A. is just a work of man. And when you got a work of man, you'd better take a good long look at it before you put your trust into it. You can depend on God, but mankind——" He shook his head.

"Mr. Dunbar, tell me one thing. Just one thing, and then I'll shut up." Crawford walked out in front of Matthew, stopping him. "If I can show you what T.V.A. is going to mean to the people of this country——" He stopped, taking a deep breath. "If I can do all that, will you agree to sell Dunbar's Cove?"

Matthew thought about it, his head bowed under the weight of the sun. The way Crawford put it, it was like denying the will of God, the Bible and the Church. But T.V.A. was just a work of man. He looked up at Crawford, a slight smile touching his lips. "Son," he said, "even if you could do all that you say, I still wouldn't sell Dunbar's Cove."

Crawford's shoulders slumped. He wanted to hurl the truth at Matthew, see him flinch under it. One word from him, Crawford, and they'd start condemnation proceedings. On his say-so.

But he pushed the thought down. That might be the easy way, but it wasn't the right way. Not yet. First he had to exhaust every other possible way, not just for the T.V.A. but for Matthew's sake, too.

He tried to smile. "I reckon I've got my answer," he said ruefully. "Come on, let's finish up. This is planted to sorghum, isn't it?" He indicated a spot on the map.

"Yes," Matthew said. "I always like to raise my own molasses."

They walked on together for another hour. When they came back into the front yard, Matthew looked at the boys sprawled in the front porch, sound asleep, their heads propped on turned-down straight chairs. "Good gosh!" he said loudly. "Here it is sundown and you're still sleeping."

Both Knox and Rice sprang up, bewildered. Matthew laughed. "That's all right," he said. "It ain't no more than two o'clock."

Knox rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. "I thought the house was falling in. I stayed out too late last night, I reckon."

Crawford was figuring on the back of his pad. He finished and looked up. "We had you down for about two hundred and fifty-odd acres," he said. "Adding in about twenty-six or -seven acres for that woodland we didn't think belonged to you makes it something like two hundred and eighty acres you own."

They were listening to him with interest.

"Of course," Crawford said. "We'll get it exactly back in the office. And I can't even make a price myself—that's the work of the appraisal committee." He stopped, pursing his lips. "But, considering the acreage and the house and barn and all, I imagine you'll be offered something about twenty to twenty-five thousand dollars."

"That much?" Matthew said. He was impressed. He looked round slowly at the land. "I never reckoned it was worth that much. Twenty-five thousand dollars."

Rice sat up excitedly. "Papa," he said. "We could take that money and start us a dairy farm!"

Matthew turned to look at him. Rice stood up and came off the edge of the porch, his hands moving.

"Listen, Papa," he said. "Get us some good land in close to town, with lots of good pasturage. Buy us some cows, the best we can find, and build us a good cow barn. Why!" His eyes lit up. "Papa, with that much money, we can milk and bottle and deliver straight to the customers. There's a lot of money in the dairy business."

Matthew stared at him unbelievably. This was the one I was thinking about if Knox gave out on me, he thought. This was the one I was depending on, far back in my mind.

"What do you know about the dairy business?" he said.

"I been studying on it for a long time," Rice said. "That's the easy farming, Papa. No hoeing and ploughing and planting—well, some, to raise your feed. But it's not anything like farming."

Matthew could feel the freezing start inside him. This has been laying back in him, he thought, waiting to come out. He turned his head and looked at Knox, sitting on the porch putting on his shoes.

"What do you know about this?" he said. "Are you——"

"Oh, that's his idea," Knox said indifferently. "That's all he's talked about ever since the first word was said about selling the place."

Matthew looked at Rice again, seeing the excitement in him dull down under his probing stare, and then Rice turned his face away.

"Let's get to the woods and get that firewood out," Matthew said heavily. "Go and get Jesse John, Knox." He turned to Crawford. "You done everything you need to do, Mr. Gates?"

"Yes," Crawford said. He looked towards the house. "I wanted to see Arlis."

"You'll see her Saturday night," Matthew said. Jesse John and Knox came out of the house. "Good-bye, Mr. Gates. Come again."

Crawford watched Matthew's disappearing back, not understanding what had happened. And yet he understood. Too well.

He went up the steps. "Arlis," he called. He went on inside the house to find her.

Chapter 4

IT WAS good to be back in the cove again, even though he had been gone only for the morning. The restfulness washed over Matthew as he turned the T-model into the road paralleling the creek bank. He had not known that change was coming so rapidly upon the land until he had gone into town today for baling wire. He stopped the car as soon as he was safely inside the entrance, letting the motor idle, and looked up the road to the house, feeling shaken inside by what he had seen.

It had begun less than half a mile from the entrance to the cove. Starting on a rule-straight line, the land was stripped of growth from the river's bank back to a curving contour that followed the pattern of the earth. The water was meant to come here, he knew, and mentally he projected the line of elevation through the cove. It would all be taken except for the upper reaches of his land; the house would be covered, the tree, the barn and the fields. There would be nothing left of Dunbar's Cove except a glassy sheet hiding and covering the inheritance.

And for that they were willing to give him money. He looked down at the letters lying on the seat beside him. In the corner of each one were the words "Tennessee Valley Authority." He had not opened them, but he knew their contents. They did not bother him as the sight of the land, stripped of trees and growth, had bothered him, not even as much as the talk he had heard in town.

He had meant to take his time with the trip but he had not stayed long after all. The men in the barber's-shop had talked only of the dam. The men at the mule barn were telling stories about the wages the T.V.A. was paying and how everybody, just about, could get on the crews for the summer. It was not his town, with its well-worn, familiar topics of crops and weather.

He had gone to the bank and near the entrance there had been a sign: T.V.A. LAND OFFICE. As he stood looking at it, he saw Crawford Gates cross the path and go up the stairs without seeing him. Matthew, perturbed in his mind, had gone on into the bank and transacted his business hurriedly, anxious to get on back home to the cove.

He put his hand on the letters. In town he had told himself he would wait until he got home. But now he did not feel like opening them at all.

There had been no place to rest his eye until he came home into the cove itself. The cove remained the same. The trees still lined the creek, shading the water. Up ahead, he could see the wisp of smoke over the chimney, the big oak, even Miss Hattie, sitting in the porch.

This won't change, he told himself. I won't let it change. Suddenly he scooped up the letters and ripped them in one quick movement. The violence of the tearing cleansed the taste of the trip out of him. "I'd better get on," he told himself aloud, "before all the ice melts."

He drove to the house, got out, and unwired a hundred pounds of ice from the front bumper. He lifted it, numbing and slick and heavy in his hands, and walked rapidly towards the back porch. The ice dripped from the August heat and by the time he leaned awkwardly to open the screen door the front of his overalls was wet. "Arlis," he called, "bring me something to wrap the ice in. Hurry now."

He heard her moving in the kitchen and he waited patiently until she came to the door with an old quilt in her hands. He took it from her and began wrapping the ice carefully. "Have us some ice-cream tonight," he said cheerfully.

"I'll make some tea for supper, too," Arlis said, "if you brought enough to chip off for tea."

"Sure," Matthew said. "Better use it up fast—it'll just melt otherwise. Where are the boys?"

Arlis smiled. "Knox took 'em back up in the woods," she said. "Right after you left."

Matthew laughed. "Now, Knox knows I like to help make his run," he said. Knox had a hand for making corn whisky; once or twice a year he would set up his still back in a thicket; he ran off a few gallons, only enough for their own use, but still it was an exciting, surreptitious,

joyous time. Matthew opened the screen door. "Well, when your mash gets ready, you've got to run it. I'll go and see how they're making out."

He drove the car into the shed, and walked up into the hills, angling across the peanut patch. It was a fifteen-minute walk to the place where Knox always set up his still. There was a fast-flowing spring, good water, and the trees and brush were thick round the site. Matthew kept watching for smoke as he came nearer, for Knox got a little impatient sometimes and began burning green wood. That was the surest way to give yourself away, though the sheriff wouldn't be likely to bother a man just for making himself a little taste of whisky as long as he didn't go peddling it around.

He was almost on the spring before he saw a shimmer of smoke in the air. Knox was being careful today, anyway. He stepped out into the open and stopped abruptly, staring at the jugs and fruit jars that were already filled and grouped together. Knox was making another run now, the colourless fluid dripping out of the bright copper maze of pipe. "What's this, son?" he said. "You making enough to last the rest of your life?"

Knox jerked up from the fire-box where he had been stuffing more wood. Rice and Jesse John stopped their work too. Knox's mouth was open with surprise. "I thought you were taking the day in town," he said. "I——" He stopped, snapping his mouth closed and turning away. "Go on back to the house, Papa. We can make out."

Matthew moved close to the still, staring. Knox's back was to him again and he was furiously feeding wood into the fire-box. Jesse John took a full fruit jar from under the drip and replaced it quickly with another. "What in the world do you think you're going to do with all this whisky?" Matthew said, bewildered.

Knox whirled round. "I aim to make some money out of this T.V. and A. some way or another. Them men working down there in the reservoir are crying for good whisky. I aim to supply them."

Knox was angry, and scared too. But he would not let himself look away from Matthew. Matthew faced him, feeling the words going through his mind like knives. "You're making whisky to sell?" he said. His mind couldn't believe it.

"You won't let me go down there to work," Knox said stubbornly "I'm staying home, just like you wanted me to. But I got me a market for my stuff and I aim to make it."

Matthew stood still, fighting it inside him. "No Dunbar," he said at last. "No Dunbar ever lowered himself to sell moonshine." He had to stop. Unable to bear the sight of Knox in his eyes, Matthew turned away from him towards Jesse John. "Take that axe," he said, "and start chopping glass until I tell you to stop."

Jesse John stood up uncertainly.

"No," Knox said.

Matthew looked back at him again. "All right, Jesse John," he said quietly. "Stay where you are."

He went across the open area towards the axe leaning against a pine tree. Picking it up, he walked back to Knox.

"You're right," he said. "They ain't got no call to break up your liquor." He held out the axe to Knox. "Take this axe and start breaking."

For a moment, Matthew thought that he was going to defy him. But, slowly, Knox's hand moved to the axe, his face still and white under the weight of Matthew's authority. "You're making me do it" he said hoarsely.

"No commercial liquor can be made on Dunbar land," Matthew said. "Not as long as I'm the man."

Knox lifted the axe, with a sudden controlled anger, and walked swiftly to the cluster of jars and jugs. He swung the axe against them in a sweeping blow. The pungency of the whisky swept, thick as musk, into the air while the axe rose and fell.

"All right," Matthew said finally. There were five jugs left. "That's enough."

Knox paused, axe lifted, and looked at Matthew. His face twisted with defiance. Then the axe came down again, cracking the final five in one swinging blow. Knox threw the axe into the glitter of broken glass and went straight away from them, making his own path into the woods. Matthew watched him go, knowing that he had not won, even though Knox had obeyed him.



"Kill the rest of that run," he told Jesse John and Rice. "And bring his copper worm to the barn. We'll put it away for him until he's ready to use it again."

He watched them begin banking and dismantling, then he walked away too, leaving them alone with the task. But he did not go towards the house. Now was not the time to see Knox again. He went instead towards the fields where he could walk the hay land and judge its ripeness for the baler. But when he came out of the woods he could not refrain from looking towards the house. Knox was not in sight; the house was still and deserted. Then he saw Connie in a white dress come from the house and progress minutely down the road. She was the only figure moving. He turned away and walked on to see about the hay.

CONNIE HAD waited long enough for Jesse John. This morning she had said something about going swimming in the creek pool and though he had told her he would be too busy with the still all day, she had believed he would come eventually, for he did not like her to swim alone there. But she was not going to wait any longer. The bathing suit under the white dress clung stifling to her body and she kept thinking about the cool, tree-shaded water.

It was bare under the trees, the bank clean where the boys had cut back the brush, and there was a home-made diving-board out over the water. The creek widened and deepened in this part, a natural swimming hole, and in the heat of summer the water remained still and cool under the trees. Above the wide part there was a footlog spanning the water. The path beyond led through small trees burdened with grapevines directly to the fields. The boys often came that way from work to take a swim before dinner.

She took off her white shoes, placing them on the stump where the diving-board was fastened, then lifted her dress over her head. She walked to the edge of the pool, and posed there for a moment.

"Just my luck," a voice said. "A bathing suit."

Startled, she straightened up and saw him standing across the creek bank on the other side: "Who—who are you?" she said, feeling fright creep into her voice.

He was tall, with a smooth, tanned face and a tiny black moustache shading the upper lip. He wore overalls and a battered felt hat. "Ever' book I ever read in my life didn't say anything about a bathing suit when a woman goes swimming by herself." He shook his head ruefully, grinning. "Just my doggoned luck."

Connie slid quickly into the creek to hide herself. "Who are you?" she demanded again.

"Me? My name is Ceram Haskins." He tilted his head towards the river. "I'm bossing one of those clearing gangs over yonder."

She felt better now. He was a stranger, true enough, but he spoke in the accents she knew. She smiled, moving her hands on the top of the water to stir it round her, looking at him.

"I was just hunting a shady place to set for a while," he said. "Say, what's your name?"

"Connie," she said.

"Why don't you come over?" he said. "We could talk better without the width of the creek between us."

She flirted her head. "I don't reckon I've got anything to talk about. Not with a stranger that hangs around."

"All right then. I'll just have to come over there."

With no preliminary preparation, he jumped into the water, clothes and all, splashing a wave over her and into her face. She gasped, backing away, her hands wiping at her water-stinging eyes. When she had them cleared again he was standing shoulder-deep next to her. "Howdy," he said gravely. "Do you go swimming here often?"

She was as shaky as jelly. His shirt was plastered to his body and she could see the roll and ripple of his muscles underneath. "Just once in a while," she said. "And I've got to go now. I——"

He reached out his big hands and took her arms, holding them tightly. "You just got here," he said. "Don't quit now, just when I decided to keep you company." His eyes were warm and questioning on her face.

She did not move. "All right," she said. The water was not that cold, but her teeth were chattering. "All right. I'll stay—for a few minutes."

He relaxed, letting her go. "You're a mighty pretty girl to live way out here." He pursed his lips, tilting his head to one side. "Now, I been

a lot of places, and seen a lot of girls. But I can't recollect ever seeing a prettier." He lifted one hand to touch her cheek. "Not even with her hair down wet."

She flinched away from the feel of his hand. "Don't," she said sharply and launched herself into a sudden activity, dog-paddling for the far side of the creek. But he followed behind her and when she climbed up on the other bank, breathing hard, he was as close as ever.

"Doggone," he said. "You're a pretty thing. Reckon a feller could take you to see a picture show tonight?"

She tossed her head, turning full face towards him. She was safe now. She knew it, and she was going to use it. So she looked at him carefully. He was bigger than Jesse John, with the same bulk and heft of shoulder that Knox had. "I don't think so," she said. "I don't think my husband would like it."

They were going to be magic words, making him disappear. But he did not move. There was only a brightening in his eyes. She could see the answer, growing there, to the question that had been in them before and she began to be afraid again.

"No husband smart enough to get a good-looking woman like you ought to let her go swimming by herself," Ceram said. He was sure now. He had thought so, for otherwise she would have gone away at the beginning. But now he was sure and he knew only one way—boldness. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

His hand touched her. "Don't!" she cried sharply. But she did not move. Then his arm went round her body, holding them together, and she could feel the strength and tautness of his legs.

"Don't," she said. "Don't." She turned her head against his chest, hiding her face, feeling the weakness in her paralysing her will. She did not want to do this to Jesse John. But this feeling had not stirred in her since Knox. Jesse John had never moved her like this. *Knox Knox Knox* she said, over and over again in her mind, feeling his body against hers as she lifted her face to kiss him.

Suddenly he jerked away, and in the same instant a voice spoke out at them. "What the hell's going on here?"

She shrank away from Ceram and saw Knox.

Oh no, she thought, horrified. *It isn't happening.* Knox's hands were clenched tight and hard against his sides and she could see the angry grind of his teeth.

"Look, mister," Ceram said. "Look, mister, I——"

Knox advanced on him, his hands lifting, and grabbed the bib of his overalls.

"I don't blame you," he said. He hit him on the side of the head. "It ain't your fault you find it like grapes on a low-hanging vine. But you get out of here. You hear me?"

He hit Ceram again and shoved him away. Ceram stumbled and caught himself, moving back from Knox. "Look, mister," he said. "I just . . ."

"Get on," Knox said. "Don't tell me about it. Just get on."

After Haskins left, Knox turned to her, his eyes scraping against her. "Slut," he said. "I ought to——"

He moved towards her and she shrank away. "I couldn't help it," she said wildly. "I couldn't, I tell you."

"No," he said. "I guess you couldn't help the way you was born." He stopped, getting hold of himself. "But help it or not I'm going to march you to the house and tell Jesse John. Maybe it'll knock that pretty picture of you out of his mind once and for all. He's my brother," he added grimly. "I don't have the right to hide from him what I seen today."

She straightened up, her voice flaring. "You got a right to talk. You started it, Knox Dunbar. You were the first."

"Don't blame me," he said. "I didn't make you the way you are."

"Yes," she said. "You were the one." She lifted her eyes to him. "That's why I married Jesse John, just so I could be in the same house. Just so I could see you."

He had to believe her. He remembered the way she had watched him after those few nights together. Her eyes watching him dancing and sparking with other girls. She had come to talk to him of casual things between the dances, her voice light and sparkling. But he knew now that her voice had not been true. That was why he had felt uncomfortable living in the house near her.

"You shouldn't have married Jesse John, then," he said, more quietly now, looking sombrely at her. He wished that he had followed the road straight on out of the cove instead of walking round this way to avoid meeting anyone at the house. If he had followed straight on he would have been gone now to the T.V.A.

"I thought——" she said.

He felt the anger flare up in him.

"You thought I'd be running after you in the bushes too," he said. "That's what you thought, didn't you?"

He did not get an answer. He had not expected one. He quietened, watching her again. "All right," he said at last. The anger was gone out of him, and the disgust. "You're safe. You're safe enough. I won't see Jesse John again. I'm leaving the cove right now. I'm going to work for the T.V.A."

"You're leaving?" she said.

"Yes," he said. His voice tightened, rasping "But let me tell you one thing, Connie. If I hear one whisper about you and any other man, I'll come back. And then I'll destroy you as my brother's wife. You hear me?"

"Yes," she said. "I hear you."

He turned and started away, then he stopped and looked back at her. "Jesse John loves you, Connie," he said. "I wish you'd remember that. I've never seen a man love his wife the way he does."

She stood straight, looking at him, her mind as quiet and chill as her body. "Good-bye, Knox," she said, and he did not know if she had even heard his words.

He walked on away from her, knowing it was over between them, finished, just as his life in the cove was finished. He crossed the footlog and took the road to town, walking fast, towards the job and the life he hoped to find for himself.

Connie stood watching him until he disappeared through the trees. Then she followed him towards the creek. She waded into the water, ignoring the easy log, and crossed to the other side, rising dripping to put on her white dress and shoes without towelling herself off, feeling her hair limp and wet round her face.

When she was ready to go she lingered almost absent-mindedly. The cove would be empty now, with Knox gone. Now she would have only Jesse John and his too-gentle love.

But Ceram had had big, muscular shoulders, heavy enough to cling to. And he had certainly been bold and forthright enough for any woman.

A small smile lit in her mind as she remembered him.

She walked back to the house and mounted the steps to the porch. Matthew put his head out of the kitchen.

"Connie," he said. "Have you seen anything of Knox?"

"Yes," she said. "He stopped to talk to me down at the swimming hole. He told me that he was leaving to work for the T.V.A. He told me good-bye."

Matthew stared at her, hearing her voice indifferent, uncaring. "Thank you," he said at last. "I just wanted to know."

She went in, closing the door behind her. Matthew stood still, looking down at the floor. He had known it, of course, had felt it from the instant of Knox's departure from the still. But he had not let himself believe it until it had become accomplished.

He walked down the passageway and went into the living-room where the old man huddled over the small summer fire. He knelt in the hearth and chunked up the burnt ends for him. When he was finished, he looked up, still kneeling. "How are you, Papa?" he said. "How are you feeling today?"

"Fine, son," the reedy voice whispered. "Just fine."

Matthew stood up.

"Papa," he said, "Knox is gone. Knox has left the cove to work for the T.V.A."

The old man did not look up, and Matthew could not tell if he had heard or not.

"Your eldest boy left too, I remember," he said. "And you couldn't do anything about it either, could you? Nothing at all."

He saw that the old man's head was lifting towards him now. The milky blue eyes wavered on his face.

"Fine, son," the old man said. "Just fine."

Chapter 5

RICE COULDN'T dress up in the week-day daytime without causing comment, but he did stop at the creek swimming hole to take a careful bath before going on to see Charlene. He had put on a clean work-shirt and overalls and he laid them carefully on the stump while he dived into the water with a bar of soap. When he came out he sat impatiently in the sun to dry himself, since he didn't have a towel. It was hard to wait with the excitement inside him.

He and Charlene were going to spend the day together. In proposing it he had made it sound like a picnic but it wasn't that, merely a wandering together in the woods. And thinking about it, he knew that something tremendous and telling in their lives was going to happen today. No girl had ever in his young life consented to walk the woods with him. And it was not just Charlene; a part of his excitement was having a room of his own last night, without Knox in the other bed. He was the only person in the house to have a room alone, like Matthew.

This seeing Charlene for a whole day was the sort of thing that Knox had done, disappearing for a day or a night, even sometimes a day and a night together. In more than this was Rice taking Knox's place, for he had seen Matthew's eyes on him at supper last night, the probing, disembodied stare, now that Knox was gone and only Rice and Jesse John were left.

He went across the footlog into the path beyond, dressed now and anxious, beginning to be afraid that she wouldn't be there. He quickened his step, unable to bear the suspense of not knowing. But she would be there. She had to be.

He came to the edge of the cotton field and paused, looking at the grape-vined tree standing in a well of sunlight, one side dark and shadowed towards the woods, the other light, towards the open sun. The grapes were thick and dark against the deep-green leaves and looking at them he could feel the taste in his mouth. He went to the butt of the tree, looking up at the grapes, hesitated momentarily, thinking of his clean clothes, and then he started climbing in a sudden spurt of energy.

He lifted himself quickly, using the limbs and the grape-vines to pull himself upward. He reached out for a ripe, rich cluster of grapes for Charlene, taking them into his hands tenderly. The tree swayed with the wind, just a slight movement, and he looked out over the fields of the cove towards the far slope of hills. The sun was new yet and the greenness sparkled with dew. A distant spider-web caught his eye, flashing like a mirror in the sun as the breeze moved it into focus. Beyond he saw Matthew on the cart track, riding on the mower hitched behind Prince and Molly. He felt guilty that he was not helping Matthew with the mowing. But today Matthew did not really need help; only one man could run the mower at a time. He would be there tomorrow or the next day, when the hay had cured. He would always be there when Matthew really needed him.

At last, holding the grapes carefully, he went one-handed down the tree, moving cautiously until his feet touched the ground. Then he went on, skirting the cotton field and at last climbing towards the hills. There was an old cotton house, far back, where they had agreed to meet. She was waiting when he arrived, sitting on the doorstep in a white dress flared wide round her. She looked up when he entered the clearing and the sun caught in her red hair, dazzling him.

"Charlene," he said.

"I've been waiting fifteen minutes," she said. "You told me you wouldn't keep me waiting."

He halted against the nervous abruptness of her words; then he came on, holding out the grapes to her. "I was getting these for you."

She drew away in a sudden motion. "Don't," she said. "They'll stain my dress. Throw them away."

He stood still again, the perfect grapes dangling in his hand. It was not going right, not the way he had seen it. He had seen himself coming from the woods to meet her, her gracious acceptance of his gift, then his taking her into his arms and . . . He wasn't clear beyond that, but it would be new and tremendous and a greater giving than the tender grapes.

He shook his head, realizing suddenly how absurd he had been. People never did and said things the way you thought. It never came

out perfectly, only stumblingly, haltingly, in the human way. Besides, the grapes didn't mean anything—and a girl had to think about things like white dresses.

"They begin to get a little sour this time of year," he said. He threw them away towards the woods, watching them splatter against the ground. He looked at his fingers, purple-stained, and rubbed them against his overalled leg. They would stain her too, and now he could not even touch her.

She stood up, gracefully, swaying the white dress in the movement "Let's walk in the woods," she said.

He took her hand, feeling it small and warm in his own. She walked beside him, close to him, and her head was down, watching the rough ground. He wondered what she was thinking; perhaps she was regretting the day, the aloneness, the inevitability that was upon them. He started to put his arm round her to reassure her but he remembered the stain of grapes. "I'm glad you came," he said after they had walked in silence for a way. He grinned. "I was afraid you wouldn't."

She looked up into his face. "You didn't think I'd go back on my promise, did you?"

"Well, no," he said, floundering. "I was just afraid——"

She moved his arm behind her back by folding her own arm, holding his hand. It brought her closer to him, surer, warmer, than just the holding of hands had done. "I'm not afraid of you, Rice," she said, "if that's what you mean."

He could feel the harsh pounding of his heart and it was right, now, after all. He looked at her in sudden clarity, seeing that she, too, had been afraid and uncertain. He walked along silently beside her. He would let the day build between them. It would grow as the grapes had grown, out of the need of spring.

"Knox left," he said. "He's gone to work for the T.V.A."

"When?" She was startled by the change of subject, he saw. Perhaps he had let the moment slip away and it would not come again.

"Yesterday," he said. "I think he was going to the dam site to find work. He wants to build a part of that big dam."

She walked along, her head down again, musing. "I tried to get

Daddy to sell out and move to town," she said. "He wouldn't do it. He says country people belong in the country."

"I reckon he's right," Rice said comfortably.

She stopped with a jerk. "I'm not country people," she said. "Don't you go saying I'm country."

He stared at her in bewilderment, wondering where it had come from. She was certainly being peculiar today. Then he smiled and put both arms round her for the first time that day. She came quickly, gladly, and she was warm and close to him while he kissed her, his lips lingering on hers. "Gee, I love you," he said breathlessly. It was different, exciting, to be kissing in broad open daylight.

She took his hand and walked on. After ten, fifteen steps she looked at him sideways. "I've never walked in the woods with a boy," she said. "My daddy would shoot me if he knew."

"Or me," Rice said gaily.

"He'd probably make you marry me," she said shyly. "Even if we had just . . . walked."

He put his arm round her slender waist. "He wouldn't have to hold no shotgun on me. In fact, I'd take it as a favour."

She stopped again, just as suddenly, turning to face him, putting her hands on his waist. "Do you mean it?" she said. Her voice was fast, hurried. "Do you mean you want to marry me?"

He stopped, hesitating, looking into her face. He hadn't meant it, exactly. He hadn't been thinking about marriage, rather about their day. But he smiled, thinking, I reckon I surprised her that time. "Of course I mean it," he said. "Oh, maybe not right away, but—"

She was the one who kissed him then and it was a different kiss. Her lips had gone soft, searching, and he knew that she had never really kissed him before. Her voice was muffled against his shirt front. "I don't feel so bad about today now, Rice."

His hands moved on her back gently, soothingly. After a moment she drew away and they went on together.

Her voice sparkled now, as the dew had sparkled from the top of the grape tree. "When we get married," she said, "we'll move into town. We can find us a little house to rent and a job for you."

He laughed. "Whoa, now. I've already got it all worked out." He turned towards her eagerly. "Listen. We're going to have to sell the place to the T.V.A. And then you know what we're going to do? Papa and I have already talked about it—it was my idea in the first place. We're going to buy a place closer in to town where we can start a dairy farm. We'll buy the finest milkers we can find, and we'll heat the barn, just like folks heat their houses." He paused, wondering at her silence. "Why, with the T.V.A. power coming in, we'll even have electric milkers and a cooler for the milk." He stopped, looking at her, knowing he could say it now. "And I want you there, Charlene. I want to marry you." He put his arms round her. "But we don't have to wait. We can . . ."

She was stiff in his arms for a moment, then she pushed him away. "I wouldn't have come in the first place if I'd known," she said bitterly. "If I'd even thought you had it in mind to take me down on the leaves like an ordinary low-down girl."

He was shocked by the harsh words, the tone of her voice. In the moment of telling it had all been so real, so true; even the dairy farm he had tried to talk to Matthew about. Now it was all swept away. None of it would be, not Charlene, not the bright future he had dreamed and painted in words. He looked at her, in defeat, and his heart drew back.

"Of course, it might not happen," he said flatly. He took her hand, feeling nothing, and turned her the way they had come.

"I didn't tell you," he said. "But I can't stay long. I've got to help Papa get the hay in."

She did not answer him. She was still and cold. They walked in silence to the old cotton house, and it was just an ordinary day between them, no different from any other. The ache and the hurt were already starting in Rice, and he saw the shattered bunch of grapes lying where he had thrown them, the purple juices drying in the sun.

"I'll tell you one thing," he said abruptly into the silence. "I'll get that dairy farm if there's any way of getting it." He stopped. "You want me to walk you home?"

Her voice was remote. "No," she said. "You'd better leave me here. Somebody might see us together and think . . ."

"Yes. We mustn't let them think." He turned away. "Well, I'd better get to the hay field. Papa's gonna be wondering where I've been."

Just like I'm wondering, he thought. When he was safely into the woods, out of her sight, he started running, running hard until the effort towards bodily motion possessed all of him.

Miss Hattie was up the grape tree when she saw Rice come plunging out of the woods, down the slope into the cove and across the fields towards Matthew. Miss Hattie had become a people-watcher, abandoning the childish pursuits that had occupied her before. Her favourite subject was Connie because she felt a small strain of guilt when she remembered how she had treated Connie before understanding came to her. But this morning she had been attracted by Rice's furtive departure and had followed him to the swimming hole, standing back in the underbrush while he soaped himself. She had followed him to the grape tree, had watched with astonishment while he climbed up there, then came down and went on. She had tried to keep up with him but he had moved too fast for her. So she had returned to the grape tree to discover what he had found there. She climbed up as swiftly as he had done, forgetting she wasn't supposed to climb trees any more. But she found only grapes, familiar and purple in her mouth, and since he had vanished now she had remained there, swaying gently in a lethargy of motion from the wind. She straightened up, alert again, when she saw him come from the woods and her eyes followed him across the fields to the mower. I should have kept up with him, she told herself sternly. You've got to keep up with them every minute or you'll never learn a thing.

She climbed down and went back along the path towards the creek, intending to go on to the field. But while she was balanced in the middle of the footlog she saw Connie walk by on the road, going towards the head of the cove. So she came quickly off the log and paralleled the road in underbrush, keeping Connie in sight, waiting for whatever would be revealed.

Connie felt heavy-eyed, tired today. But she moved briskly, with decision. She had remained in bed long after Jesse John had risen, trying to deny the decision she had made. At last she got up, opened the door and walked out of the house in one continuous movement,

her mind blind, yet her feet moving briskly towards her goal. She had not even paused to dress properly, had thrown on an old house-dress and shoes and there was no lipstick and powder on her face. But today she did not need beauty.

She came to the heading where the cove road angled into the unmade road going down-river towards town. She hesitated for a moment, turning to look back. She could see the house from here, distant between the trees. In her growing up Dunbar's Cove had always seemed a richer, steadier, easier place to live than her own cove. But now she had lived there, and it was empty for her. She felt nothing of regret, only the emptiness she had known yesterday when Knox had told her he was leaving. She looked for a steady moment, and then she turned and went on, walking in tree shade in the middle of the unmade road.

After a while, she began to feel happier, the way she had felt when she had been a little girl adventuring abroad by herself. She came out of the trees suddenly into the clearing and stopped, bewildered by the sharpness of the sun. She shaded her eyes and looked ahead. She could see the men working out there, not too far from the road, see the glint and swing of their axes. She dropped her hand to her side and walked out into the sunlight, moving slowly. She put a swing into her hips as she walked, knowing they would see her.

She was almost past before Ceram noticed her. He recognized her instantly, and it stunned him like a fist: *She's walking for me. Even after yesterday, she's walking for me.*

He did not stop to remember that these men lived in this area and that they would immediately place her, their idle voices touching and naming her, making history and legend. He stood and watched; then he folded up the time book and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. He put the pencil away carefully too and went towards the place where she had disappeared into the trees. Now he would wipe out yesterday, would have his revenge on the big, angry man.

He reached the woods, hurrying now. She was waiting for him just inside the covering shelter of the trees, standing idly in the road, not even watching him come to her. But she had seen him out of the corner of her eye, and had waited, knowing he would arrive.



"You've got to take me away," she said at once. "You've got to."

He stopped before her, frightened by her words. He had not expected words. "What's the matter?" he said. "What happened?"

She looked at him, her face pale. "You've got to take me away," she said. "You've got to."

"I can't take you anywhere," Ceram said. "I'll be working here for a long time."

"This isn't the only dam in the world," she said steadily. "A man like you can find work anywhere."

Ceram hesitated. "Listen," he said hoarsely. "I . . . we didn't . . ."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide and lambent. "But we're going to," she said. "Then we'll go away together, to another dam and another job. We'll go right now, today."

She came to him, taking his hand like a child. He followed her like a child into the trees. After they were hidden from the road she turned to him, trembling in his arms. But a deep-down streak of practicality leavened her desire. "You are going to take me away?"

In all his bold years no woman had come to him as she had come. "Yes," he said. "I'll take you away. God knows I will."

WITHOUT knowing she was moving, Miss Hattie whirled noiselessly and ran away, fleeing out of the woods, across the road, and into the woods again on the other side like a sudden deer out of cover and into cover. She kept on until she had circled through trees all the way into the safety of the cove. Then she sat down on the ground, trembling. She had listened to their talk, hearing the words clear and sharp, and thinking, *That is it. That is it.* She looked down at her body with a new respect, knowing that it could get away from Miss Hattie as Connie's had got away from Connie.

She got up, and went on to the house, going through the barn. A voice reached for her and she turned, looking at Jesse John standing in the doorway of the crib, his arms full of shucked corn. He was preparing the noon feed for the mules.

"Did Connie get up yet, Miss Hattie? She was asleep when I left."

She had not thought about Jesse John. Now she stared at him, white-faced, feeling a new compassion and love for him. He was her brother and Connie had betrayed him. Jesse John had not been a true love for Connie. But Miss Hattie knew it was going to hurt. She looked down at her feet. "Yes," she said non-committally. "I saw her this morning."

Jesse John dumped the armload of ears. "I didn't know where she'd got to," he said. "What has she been doing with herself?"

Miss Hattie felt the shrinking inside her again. There was no way she could lie. He would know from the sound of her voice that she was lying. "Don't make me tell you, Jesse John," she said. "Don't make me be the one to tell you."

He turned sharply towards her. "What do you mean?" he said. "What are you talking about?"

She visibly gripped her resolution, standing still and straight. "She went off with another man," she said. "I followed her down the road until she met him and they talked—then she went off with him."

Her arm was thin under his sudden grip. "How long have you known about this?" he said.

She writhed under the harsh strength of his hand. "I didn't know," she said, crying, the tears streaking the dust of her face. "I didn't, Jesse John. I swear I didn't."

He saw the truth in her face. He sat down in the open doorway of the corn crib, putting his hands over his face to hide the wetness from her. "I knew she'd do it," he said, his voice breaking. "I knew it from the day she married me, but I wouldn't believe it."

Miss Hattie went to him, putting her hand on his head. She felt very wise and womanly, but the hurting reached from him into her. "You couldn't help it," she said.

He lifted his head. "No man could love her the way I do. No man could treat her with the goodness I tried to treat her with."

Miss Hattie stopped, bewildered. "Maybe goodness ain't enough. Maybe it takes more. . . ." She stopped, feeling young again, the acquired wisdom gone. "I don't know," she said shrilly. "How do you expect me to know? You're the grown." She ran away from him towards the house, crying again. I don't know, she thought. I don't even know if it's the hardest to be man or woman. She sat down on the back steps, bending her face into her lap, and cried.

After a while, Jesse John rose and went towards the field and Matthew, walking with the stiff, stumping steps of an old man. He met Matthew and Rice on the cart track, coming to dinner. He stopped before them, winding down like a toy out of the walking. "Papa," he said, "I've come looking for you."

"What's the matter?" Matthew said in immediate alarm.

Jesse John's face was naked. "Connie has left me," he said.

It was not a surprise to Matthew. He turned his head slowly, looking at Rice. "Take the mules on to the barn," he said.

Subdued, Rice took the reins and passed on.

"It was one of those T.V.A. men?"

Jesse John shook his head. "I don't know."

Matthew went close to him. "What are you going to do, son?"

"I don't know. I thought she'd settle down here, get to like it."

"You should have given her a baby," Matthew said. "A woman needs a baby to know she's married to a man."

Jesse John's face twisted. "She wouldn't let me," he said. "She wasn't ready to start raising young'uns yet."

Matthew put his hand on his shoulder. "Son," he said. "No man in the world can keep a woman that don't want to be kept."

Jesse John's face hardened into stubborn lines. "I'm going after her. I'm going to find her and bring her back."

Matthew looked into his face. "You still want her? After this?"

Jesse John nodded his head, ashamed. "I love her, Papa," he said. "I've got to go and find her."

Matthew looked away. "How long you aim to keep on looking?"

Jesse John's voice was miserable. "Until I find her," he said. "I don't know how long that will be."

Matthew studied him. He had not realized this hard core in Jesse John, down under the gentleness and compliance he had always shown. It would be a long looking; Connie would go far and fast with her new man. "If you feel like you've got to go," he said slowly, "I'm not going to try to stop you." He felt his voice choke up. "I'd have told Knox the same thing, if he'd stopped to ask me. You're men now. You know your own mind."

"I don't aim to leave you," Jesse John said. "I've just got to find her."

Matthew put his hand on his shoulder again. It was an unaccustomed closeness between them. "Go on," he said. "But come back when you can. I'll need a man to follow after me one of these days."

"I'll come," Jesse John said. "I promise you that, Papa. After I'm done looking."

Matthew watched Jesse John walk away. "If you see Knox," he called. "If you see Knox—tell him he's welcome, too."

"I'll tell him," Jesse John said, going on. Matthew watched him, knowing that in his slow, careful way he would go back to the house now to pack clothing and say his good-byes to Miss Hattie and Arlis and the old man. Matthew did not want to see him again before he left. He went to the barn, took the mules out, and harnessed them again. Without looking towards the house he went back to the field to go on with the mowing. Now, with two of his sons gone from him, the burden of work would be doubly heavy. Rice was all that he had left.

VISTA: *Mile Three-Four-Nine*

IT HAD been a nameless earth, until the engineers came. First they had simply called it Mile Three-Four-Nine. But gradually, imperceptibly, it had become Chickasaw, in thought and in reality.

Chickasaw is being built of three parts tied from hill to hill and bedded on old firm rock. First, earth, packed from hill-buttress to river's edge; second, concrete, laboriously formed and poured against the bed of the river; then earth again, across the sweep of southern plain to the hills on that side. Lying tight against the northern bank, a lock will pass shipping to and fro. Across the breadth of the river itself will lie the spillway, eighteen bays wide. Beyond, against the southern shore, will rise the massive power-house, arranged to take ten thousand cubic feet of water every second, snatching out of its fall and race the cool lightning of power.

Chickasaw is not large as some dams are large; Chickasaw will not stand in lonely grandeur, dramatically control floods of its own. It will operate quietly and effectively in conjunction with the other dams of its like up and down the river.

In August, Chickasaw was only just beginning, though designs and plans had been made since January. But now, in November, Chickasaw has settled down to the building. The concentration of work lies in the lock area and on the south bank, where bad foundation trouble has been encountered. Every day new men continue to come to the dam, drawn by the promise of good wages, by the excitement of new things. They walk up to the employment office in overalls and brogue shoes, courteously, bashfully, asking the question they have come to ask. They listen with incomprehension to the need for tests. They sit at desks like schoolchildren, to fill in the voluminous forms. They lean close over them as though they were near-sighted (though most of these men could see a squirrel in a tree two hundred yards away) and grip the stub of pencil in unaccustomed fingers. They are baffled by all this; but there is strength in them, and hope.

Those who are taken find that the work is hard. This is not W.P.A.

or P.W.A. This is a dam a-building, and every man must put in his full hard eight hours to meet the schedule. Earth and rock and concrete mix must be moved in man-powered Georgia buggies, hands must dig and delve and cut away. But it is good work, for they can see the dam shaping and rising before their eyes.

The work is the same kind of unskilled labour these hillmen have always performed. Mixed with them are skilled men brought from other areas, men who sit high over power tools, disdainful of those labourers below. But it is possible for a man to learn a skill, a trade, to win the operation of a jackhammer, a bulldozer or a derrick. This news, too, percolates back into the hills and each day brings one or two or half a dozen men to the employment office.

Now, in November, the first season of good weather is behind them and the first of bad weather is coming. The men are accustomed to the work, they have fallen into routine. They congregate in the shower-rooms at night to toss dice against the wall, or they lie on their bunks looking at the ceiling or they study the materials they have been given in their classes. They are casual, easy, relaxed; they are on the job, they are building Chickasaw.

Chapter 6

IT'S DIFFICULT for two men to gather a crop planted by four. Matthew worked harder that autumn than he had ever worked in his memory. Every day he was in the fields before daylight, and worked until dark. And in the midst of the work he considered the future, making plans for the next year so that he could keep all his land in cultivation until his sons came home.

Rice worked with him, as steadily as Matthew himself, and Matthew was grateful for his presence. The fields seemed lonely without the hoot and holler of Knox's gladness of living, without Jesse John's quietness. There were only Matthew and Rice, Arlis and Miss Hattie, and the old man. They were sparse round the big oak table in the kitchen at meal-times.

After a while Matthew knew that Rice was no longer seeing his girl. He was withdrawn, with sadness in his face, and he confined his talk to the work and the weather. Once or twice he spoke wistfully of dairying, of the wonder of great milkers in a heated barn.

"We're too far from town for that," Matthew told him.

Rice said, "We'll have to"

"We don't have to do anything," Matthew said harshly. "I said we're too far from town for that."

The two elder boys had not even sent a postcard to apprise Matthew of their whereabouts. But Matthew had not expected to hear from them. The Dunbars were not a handy family with the United States mails.

Their only visitor was Crawford Gates. He came at least once a week, usually on Saturday to take Arlis to the pictures. Matthew was civil with him but the first friendliness had gone. He felt a tensing when Crawford was in the cove, awaiting momentarily the renewed assault upon his defences. But it did not come. Crawford visited, apparently, only to court Arlis now.

There are rituals for autumn too, the quick stoop and snatch after cotton, the splitting of stove-wood dried from the summer's cutting, the cry of geese going overhead from north to south. For the first time in his life, Matthew hired cotton pickers; and for a few days the cove was alive with people moving stooped among the rows, the long sacks trailing behind them; and there were spread dinners at the end of the cotton rows, brought in syrup buckets and dish-pans with a white cloth tied over them.

When the cotton picking was nearly done, the Indian corn came ripe, and Matthew and Rice walked down rows on each side of the moving wagon, tossing in the ears with hollow, frosty thuds, while the mules moved slowly, unreined, straight down the rows. Then there was the excitement of the long slow pull of a cotton-loaded wagon to the gin, the waiting in line before the scales, and the sudden scoop of air gulping the cotton out of the wagon bed. Afterwards Matthew visited the cotton offices with the brown-papered samples tucked under his arm, watching studious men pull and tug at the fibre. The price was better this year, and the harvest was good.

Then in November came the richest ritual of them all. Matthew, one night after supper, went to take the Sears, Roebuck catalogue from the shelf. It was fat and thick in his hands, a cornucopia of richness, the book of wonder and desire. He brought it back to the table and spread it open where his plate had been. He looked about at the others. "I reckon it's time to make out our order," he said. "Every God's one of us is going to need winter clothes."

He saw the quickening in their faces as they leaned towards him. He watched them, his gaze fond, seeing the long-built dreams in their eyes. Each of them at some secret time had taken the catalogue down from the shelf to pore over the thick, glossy pages of colour, the thin brown pages of sepia illustrations, all the wonderful store of treasures to be had for mere parcel post and money.

He laughed. "All right," he said. "Start telling me what you want and I'll tell you what you can have."

Arlis put her hands together in an agony of decision. "I'm going to need some things for the house," she said. "A new coffee-pot, for one thing. The bottom's just about burnt out of ours."

He looked at her, teasing. "How about some pretty clothes?" he said. "White dresses and satin scarves for your fellow?"

She blushed. "I don't need any new clothes," she said. "Maybe a house-dress or two."

Matthew laughed again. He began tearing the green order form out of the book. "The price of cotton was better this year," he said. "So everybody gets something they don't need. You'd better start making up your minds." He opened the book at the men's wear. "I'll put down Papa first," he said. "He'll have to have some new overalls and shirts. Two pairs of long underwear, too." He began writing carefully. "I don't reckon he'll want anything extra," he said sadly. "He's past the time of wanting. What about you, Rice?"

"I need an overall jumper," Rice said. "I'd like one of them blanket-lined ones. And a pair of shoes."

"I forgot shoes for the old man," Matthew said. "He wants them high-topped shoes made of soft leather. Wouldn't put nothing else on his foot." He paused. "What else, Rice?"

Rice looked down at his hands on the table. "Nothing, I reckon," he said. "I got all I want."

"Don't you want some Sunday trousers and glossy shoes to go sparkling in?"

Rice turned away. "I've done quit that foolishness."

Matthew laughed. "Come spring you'll start again," he said. "Now, how about that pair of trousers there? They suit you?"

Rice's eye was drawn to the catalogue page. "No," he said. "Those others, next to it."

Matthew frowned. "You got an eye for trousers, all right," he said. "They're three dollars more." He saw the movement in Rice's face. "I'm not arguing with you. They're probably worth about three dollars more of a girl's attention."

They watched him write again, noting the figures and weights and measures carefully. Then he turned his eye to Miss Hattie. "Now what about Miss Hattie? You want a gross of empty snuff-bottles for that road thicket of yours?"

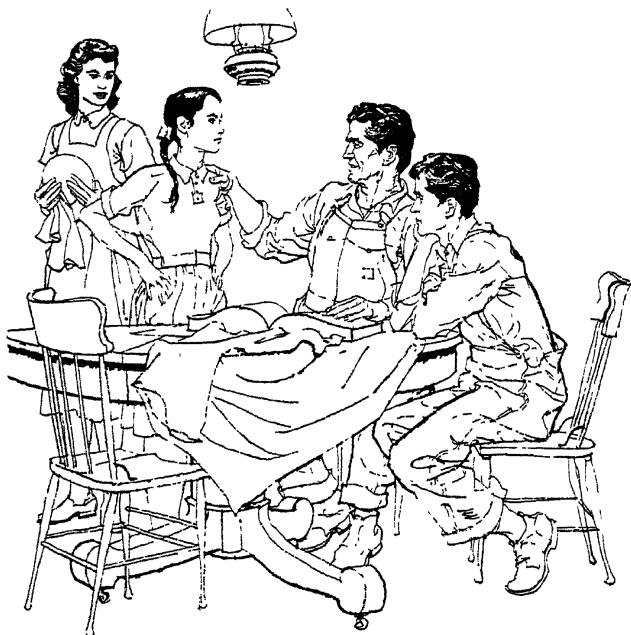
Miss Hattie was considering, her tongue between her teeth. There were so many things, wonderful things, but she didn't know about them yet. Lipstick and powder, all the strange instruments of woman's beauty. She just didn't know: "I don't see why we have to order from the old Sears and Roebuck," she said. "You can't tell what you want unless you can lay your hand on it."

"I'll tell you one thing," Arlis said firmly. "You've got to order this young'un some brassières. Size thirty-two. See, here it . . ."

Her voice ran down in the silence. Matthew sat still, regarding Miss Hattie. Miss Hattie flamed. "I don't need no old brassières," she said in a choked voice.

Arlis laughed. "You'll be laying the family open to shame, Miss Hattie, if you don't take to 'em."

Matthew took his eyes away from Miss Hattie, turning the pages of the catalogue. Up to now it had been fun; making out the autumn order was always fun. But now . . . he had not known that Miss Hattie—his favourite, the youngest—was growing, no longer a child, not yet a woman. He closed his mind and began writing on the pad.



"You just as well not put it down," Miss Hattie said belligerently. "You ain't going to harness *me* up in them things."

Matthew raised his head. "Come here, Miss Hattie."

She came reluctantly round the table to him. "It's a natural thing, honey," he said gently. "You can't fight a natural thing. There's no use to even try. Everything grows and changes. You grow and change, just like the land and the trees."

He looked at the others but they were not watching. Rice was tilted back in his chair, whistling idly. Arlis was standing in the doorway, in a listening attitude. "I thought I heard a car," she said.

Matthew turned a page of the catalogue. "And how about some of them?" he said. "Those with the lace on the bottom?"

Miss Hattie's eye was drawn to the page. Her breath drew in involuntarily. "Real lace?" she said.

"Real lace," Matthew affirmed. "It says so right here."

She was leaning over the table by now, reading. Satisfied, Matthew began writing.

Arlis said, "I do hear a car. Now I wonder who . . ."

The sound of the motor was loud now. Matthew, looking at Arlis, saw the change come into her face. "It's Crawford," she said.

They were all silent, waiting until the engine cut off, the car door slammed. They heard Crawford's voice saying, "Hello, hello," but Matthew still did not move. He just kept on looking at Arlis while she opened the door and went out into the darkness.

Matthew looked back at the catalogue in front of him. He riffled the pages idly, and then closed the thick book decisively. "We'll finish it tomorrow," he said.

Arlis led Crawford into the kitchen. Crawford was talking rapidly, his face lit with excitement. "Hello, Mr. Matthew," he said. "He won. He won it again."

"You didn't expect him to lose, did you?" Matthew said. "Arlis, I'd like another cup of coffee, if you're a mind to hot it up a little bit."

"Of course, Papa," Arlis said.

"Who won?" Rice said.

"Roosevelt!" Crawford said. "Landon didn't get anywhere. Roosevelt landslided him right out of existence."

Matthew watched Miss Hattie reach for the catalogue and pull it in front of her. He smiled to himself when he saw where she was looking, among the flimsy vanities of women. She'll be all right, he told himself. He looked back at Crawford. "You sound like you was worried about it," he said. "Shucks, you could have walked the coves for half a day and found out that Landon didn't stand a chance."

Crawford sat down at the table, frowning. "It looked like a close thing," he said. "The Supreme Court throwing out Triple-A last spring, and the way they're getting after T.V.A. in the courts, and all them newspapers all over the country predicting this and that all on the Landon side." He smiled. "I don't mind telling you, I was scared."

Matthew watched Arlis bring the coffee, and then sit down naturally and easily by Crawford's side. Matthew had to keep his frown from showing on his face. For the first time in his life, that summer and autumn, Matthew had been afraid, afraid of a girl and a man, and of love. He had watched Arlis and Crawford, had seen them depart each Saturday night to the pictures, laughing over their private jokes. He had seen the softness come into her face in the middle of her daily labours, the broom slowing, her hands peeling potatoes dropped lifeless in her lap, and he knew that she was remote from him, from the cove, from all the history of the Dunbars.

At first he had liked Crawford and if it had not been for his job, Matthew recognized, he might have liked the idea of Arlis and Crawford together, for Arlis was getting on for an unmarried girl. But though he knew part of his fear of Crawford was fear for the cove, fear of the T.V.A., Matthew could not alter the existence of the fear and the anger within him. He wanted to forbid the cove to Crawford. Every time he heard the car coming, saw Crawford greeting them courteously, then taking Arlis away on his arm, Matthew had felt a cold tightening in him. But there was nothing he could do. He could only keep his thoughts to himself, his voice friendly and non-committal, hoping against hope that it would not happen.

Crawford put down his cup. "T.V.A. can go forward now," he said. "We'll have the money we need to finish the job."

"Maybe I should have voted for Landon, then," Matthew said mildly. He lifted his cup again. "But the fact is, I voted for Roosevelt, just like I voted for him in 'thirty-two. Well, you and Arlis better go on about your business now." He glanced at the catalogue in front of Miss Hattie. "I've got to get our winter order made up for Mr. Sears and Mr. Roebuck. They'll be real disappointed if I don't get it in this week."

But Crawford was sitting back in his chair now, his hands rigid on the table. "I didn't come to see Arlis this time, sir," he said. "I came to see you." He stopped. Then he plunged on. "Sir, I've been sticking my neck out for you in that office all summer long. I've been telling them that you were a sensible man and all you needed was time to understand, to see your neighbours' point of view."

He stopped, breathing hard.

"Mr. Matthew," he went on finally, "you're lagging behind everybody else. We've bought land, and we've signed papers." The words sharpened into bitterness. "With just about everybody but you. You're the only hold-out in this whole area."

He stood up. "I bet my job on you, Matthew," he said. "On your basic reasonableness. I've stood before my boss's desk telling him that if you didn't come to see the rightness of this, without our using force or violence or law, I'd hand him my job."

"Sit down, son," Matthew said, mildly. He looked up at Crawford. "I said sit down." When Crawford sat, Matthew turned to Arlis. "Pour him another cup of coffee," he said.

They sat quiet while Arlis got the coffee-pot. Matthew watched her hand rest on Crawford's shoulder as she leaned to pour and the fear stirred in him again.

"You oughtn't to have told your boss that," Matthew said. "I didn't ask for your help. You didn't have the right to put me under obligation to you. For that reason, I don't feel no obligation."

"I didn't do it for you," Crawford said. "Well, partly, I guess. But mostly for Arlis."

Matthew looked up at Arlis. "Did you ask him to do it?"

"No, I didn't ask him," Arlis said. "But I'm glad he did."

Matthew was stopped. He watched Arlis's face, knowing now that she would be for ever on Crawford's side. He looked at Rice, who wanted a dairy farm; at Miss Hattie, watching with incomprehension. He was alone. There was only the old man who sat the day long before the fire.

Matthew leaned forward, putting his hand to his face. "Crawford," he said. His voice was tired. "I stand where I stood the day you first walked into this cove. Dunbar's Cove is older than me and you put together. Newness can't uproot it and tear it away. I've got one job and one job alone on this earth. It was given to me to manage Dunbar's Cove for a generation, and to choose the one it'll pass to after I'm gone."

He had never been a man to put things into words. But now he had to try it. He had to pass on to his children, not just his inheritance, but

his feeling and his belief, too. "You walk into the cove with a piece of paper in your hand and expect me to lay aside, on your say-so alone, what I was put on this earth to do. But love and happiness and everything a man owns in this life—even children—can't stand against that main job I was given to do."

Crawford's shoulders slumped. He said, his voice low, "I sat there and argued with my boss about you, Matthew, because we had time. We've still got time, but only a year maybe. Then something's got to be done. That's why I come tonight, to see if you'd had a chance to do some thinking. Dunbar's Cove is a big thing to you. But T.V.A. is bigger, it's for the whole country."

"Bigness don't make right. Law don't make right," Matthew said stubbornly. "And you might as well quit talking about all you've done for me, because I didn't ask you to do it."

"I didn't do it for you," Crawford yelled in exasperation. "I did it for Arlis, because I love her and I want to marry her and I . . ."

His words stopped in the heavy silence. Matthew was looking at Arlis, saw the shift in her face, the quickly suppressed glow. "Did you know about this?" he said.

"He never said it," Arlis said. She looked down on Crawford's head bent over the table. "Not before this minute."

"Crawford Gates," Matthew said. "Let me tell you something. You walked into this cove on a day last summer. A day when my son Knox had not gone away to work for the T.V.A. My daughter-in-law Connie had not followed a stranger-man come flaunting his money and his wildness before her, drawing away my son Jesse John in search of her. My son Rice had not dreamed a crazy dream about heated barns and electric milkers and a kind of farming that's just play-farming. And Arlis. On that day of your coming she was happy here at home, doing the work her mama left her to do. You've parted us all from our closeness. This is the thing you've done in a few short months. Is this the goodness you're talking about, Crawford, the rightness of the T.V.A.?"

Crawford stared at his hands and Matthew saw Arlis's hand move to his shoulder again. The movement wrenched at his heart.

Then Crawford looked up at him. "I couldn't have done it, Matthew,"

he said, "if it hadn't been already in them. Without me and the T.V.A., it would have been something else. Matthew, you can't stop change."

"I'm keeping Dunbar's Cove like it is. I was brought here to do it and by God I'll do it." Matthew stopped, breathing hard.

"But you can't even do that." Crawford rose. "When the time comes the T.V.A. can take your land, whether you like it or not, and pay you what it's worth."

Matthew's face flushed. He stood up, startled. "You lie," he said. "No government can take a man's——"

"Yes," Crawford said. "There's a legal procedure for it. The property can be condemned for the common good, the right appraised amount paid over, and it's no longer yours. We don't do it unless it's a case of have-to; we'd rather a man came to us of his own free will."

Matthew moved round the table. "Get out of here," he said. "Don't set your foot in this cove again. You hear me?"

"It won't do any good," Crawford said.

"Get out," Matthew said inflexibly. "This land is still mine. And I'm telling you to get your feet off my soil once and for all."

"But Arlis——"

"I don't care."

"Papa," Arlis said. "I love Crawford, Papa. I love him."

The words again stopped movement in the room. Matthew could feel a tight gripping in his chest. Miss Hattie was huddled small in her chair as though trying to disappear. Rice was standing uncertainly, his eyes bewildered. "I hadn't told him, either," Arlis said, her voice shaky and uncertain. "But I love him, Papa."

Matthew drew a long breath. "That don't change my mind," he said. "Go away, Crawford. Don't let me see your face again."

Arlis cried out, "But Papa!" Matthew ignored her, looking at Crawford. Crawford smiled, a helpless smile, and turned towards Arlis, reaching his hand to her.

Matthew had to decide it now, once and for ever. "Don't touch her," he said sharply. "Go on now. I'm telling you for the last time."

Crawford drew back his hand. He turned and went out of the door without a word, out into the darkness.

Matthew stared fearfully at Arlis. But she did not move until the sound of his feet had gone. Then she sank into the chair where Crawford had been sitting and put her head on the table.

Matthew moved, finally, going back to his own chair. He sat down and pulled the catalogue before him. "Well," he said. His voice was startling in the room. "Let's finish making out the Sears and Roebuck order. Old Man Sears and Mr. Roebuck are sure to be looking for it about now."

They did not answer him. None of them answered him, and after a while Matthew stood up and went out of the room.

THE MOTOR horn blew, the following night, before they had finished the Sears, Roebuck order that had been left uncompleted from the night before. It was just a job now, something that had to be done. Rice was off somewhere and only Matthew, Arlis and Miss Hattie were seated round the table.

There was no conversation except the necessary statements of fact from Arlis, listened to by Matthew and entered on the green order form without comment or joy. Something had gone out of the house that they had never even thought about having before it had gone. The walls of the house were cold.

To Matthew, it was like the days after the death of Canna, his wife. The house had been cold, then, too, and for two days the children had moved cautiously in the rooms, quiet, mouselike in their strangeness. Then, on the third day, Matthew had come into the house to find Arlis bending over the stove, her hair down in her face, her skin flushed with the heat of the fire. She had turned to him, putting one hand on her cheek, wiping flour and streaking flour with one movement. "Supper will be ready in a minute, Papa," she had said. "Where are the boys?" And the coldness was gone from around them in that moment; the kitchen was cheerful and alive again.

The coldness was the same now, and he felt in his heart that this time there would be no return of warmth and laughter. It was a heaviness within him as he noted details meticulously on the green order form for Mr. Sears and Old Man Roebuck.

Then the horn blew. It was two quick staccato blasts, sweeping into the cove from the far road, and Arlis's head snapped up, listening, waiting for it to come again. Matthew felt the straining in him, the waiting for a return of sound, and the horn blew again. Arlis looked at Matthew. "You can finish it by yourself, can't you?" she said.

"Yes," Matthew said, "we've got everything, I think."

She stood up. "I'll be back," she said. "I won't be long."

He looked at her, but did not speak, knowing that she would go anyway. He turned to Miss Hattie and said, "You'll help me, Miss Hattie, won't you?"

"Yes, Papa," she said, and it was not until Arlis had gone that he realized that Miss Hattie had used the word she had never spoken to him.

Arlis went quickly down the road towards the head of the cove. She had known Crawford would return. She knew also that he would observe Matthew's interdiction and she had spent the day listening. Now she shivered in the swirl of cold wind; she had left the house wearing only her thin sweater.

She saw headlights sweeping down the road even as he blew again. She stepped out into the beam of light so that he could see her and he slid the car to a stop. He opened the door and stepped out, putting his strong arms round her, holding her. He laid his face against hers. "You meant it," he said. "You meant what you said last night."

She drew away, looking up into his night-darkened face. "Of course," she said. "I wouldn't have said it if . . ."

He stopped the words, his lips cold against hers. "Let's get in the car," he said then, shakily. "It's got a heater."

She slid under the wheel into the car. He rolled up the window on his side and the car quickly became comfortable. "I didn't know whether you'd come," he said. "Whether you could even hear the horn."

"I heard," she said quietly. "Papa heard, too."

He reached out for her and she came into his arms again. They were a warm house in themselves. "Why didn't you ever tell me before?" he said. "All this long summer I've . . ."

She laughed softly. "You didn't tell me either."

"I was scared to."

"Me too," she said. "Of course, a girl——"

They laughed again and his arms held her tighter. After a moment she drew away, and her voice was sober when she spoke again. "What are we going to do, Crawford?"

He watched her while he lit a cigarette. The brief flame illumined her face. He had never been in love. He had known a few women but he had never experienced the delicious weakness he felt now. He looked at her sharply, seeing a big woman, knowing that her flesh was warm and alive. She would have many children easily and her body would be strong and surging. He loved her.

"What are we going to do? Get married," he said, wondering how he could say the words so calmly.

She sat quietly, her hands folded in her lap. "We can't, Crawford," she said sadly. "You know we can't."

He leaned towards her. "Then will you . . ."

She shook her head quickly. "No, Crawford. Don't ask me that."

"You said you love me."

She turned towards him and put one hand on his neck. "Yes," she said. "I said it. I said it in Papa's face, proud of it. Don't ask me to shame it."

"It would be a poor thing to do," he agreed slowly.

She sat still again. He lowered the window, flipped out his cigarette and raised the window. "There's just one thing to do," he said finally. "Waiting won't help matters any—it'll just make it worse. Don't even go back there, Arlis. Leave with me tonight."

She shook her head. "I can't, Crawford. Knox left him. Jesse John left him. I've got a duty, Crawford. It's my job to clean for him, and cook, and can. I've done it since Mama died."

"There's Miss Hattie," Crawford said.

"She's still a child. She wouldn't know how."

They sat silent again. He put his arm round her and drew her against him. The heater blew warm air and outside the darkness was bleak and cold. Arlis shivered as though a breath of the coldness had reached her. "What's going to happen to him, Crawford?"

"He'll lose the cove," Crawford said harshly. "In the end."

She turned in his arms. "But do you have to be the one?"

"No," he said at last. "I could quit my job, and let them put another man in my place. But I don't want to drop out, Arlis. I want to do my part in the T.V.A." His voice became bitter. "Other people move off their land. Some don't like it, but they see it has to be done. Who is Matthew Dunbar to be any different?"

"He's Matthew Dunbar," Arlis said softly. "That's the difference, and he's got a right to it. He don't have to be like nobody else." She touched his lips lightly with her fingers. "Don't work yourself into a bitterness," she said.

His lips moved, kissing her fingers. "All right. I like the old buzzard—that's why I get so mad at him. Nobody had ever put a welcome to me in the way he did that first time I come here, even though he didn't know me from Adam's off ox." He put a finger to her cheek and pressed it in a firm line to her chin. "You know," he said gravely, "I'd like nothing better than to marry you and move right into the cove with Matthew. He'd give us a room in the house, an honoured place at the table, and work to do. It would be home, the kind of home I've never known. But it can't be that way, Arlis. Because I've got a call, too, and my call goes against his. I can't quit any more than he can."

She bowed her head. "Yes. I see." She lifted her head. "I'd better be going now," she said. "They'll be wondering."

He held her closer. "Don't go yet."

She moved out of his arms. "There ain't much a woman can do in this world," she said. "She can cook, and clean, and can. She can marry, and bear children, and that's a big thing all in itself. But when the men rise up against each other, a woman can only stand out of the middle and pray for the man she loves." She felt a sob in her throat and tried to choke it back. "What's a woman to do when she loves her daddy and . . ."

"Make a choice," Crawford said, too quickly. "She's got to make her choice and stick by it."

She shook her head. "Crawford, don't you see I can't?" She looked at him steadily. "I love you, Crawford. But if I went with you, not a soul

in this world could say what Matthew Dunbar might do. I just can't let him be driven that far."

"But——" he said. She stopped him.

"He's a kindly man," she said. "But once in his life, he fought his brother all over the front yard to keep the cove from going into his wasting hands. He could have killed him." She shivered. "I don't remember it happening—but I've heard talk of how he was that day. I can't let him go that far again, and I'm the only one who can keep him from going that far." She looked out into the darkness. "We can wait, Crawford, because of the kind of loving we've got for each other. We know we'll always be there."

He put his hands on the steering-wheel, staring at them. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe. I'm not as sure as you are." He took a deep breath. "I'm not going to see you again, then?"

"You can't come to the house," she said quickly. She touched his neck again gently, as she would have touched a child. "But every time you blow your horn, I'll be down here." She laughed. "Even if I have to leave the dirty dishes to do it."

He took her again in his arms. They kissed, and kissed again. Then Arlis drew away and slipped out of the car.

"Tomorrow night," Crawford called. "Here."

She nodded and waved and went quickly back up the cove. She was thoroughly chilled by the time she gained the passageway, and she went gratefully into the warmth of the kitchen, thinking with the wry practicality of a woman that it was going to be a cold lovemaking through the long winter.

Miss Hattie was alone in the kitchen. She watched Arlis hurry to the stove to warm herself. She had wanted to follow Arlis, as she had followed Connie, but she had been afraid to. She was afraid that Arlis was going away, too, and she had waited in the kitchen thinking that in the morning she would have the breakfast to cook.

"You're back," she said.

"Yes," Arlis said. She looked round. "Where's Papa?"

"In with Grandpaw," Miss Hattie said. She got up from the table. "I thought you were . . ."

Arlis laughed. She put out her hands and hugged Miss Hattie close to her. "You thought I was leaving like Connie did? I wouldn't leave like that, Miss Hattie. I don't have no call to. I've got Crawford, and I can depend on him."

"But you said you loved each other," Miss Hattie said reproachfully.

"Of course we do. And it's a real loving. That's why we don't have to run and hide. We can stand up proud before people."

Miss Hattie frowned, still not satisfied. But Arlis was looking towards the door into the living-room, knowing she had to face Matthew sooner or later. She went to the door and opened it.

There was a roaring fire in the fire-place and the room was too hot. The old man was standing naked in a wash-tub close to the hearth and Matthew was washing him swiftly with a washcloth, trying to finish the job before the old man became chilled.

Arlis went into the room and Matthew looked up. "It's turning cold outside," she said. "Going down fast."

"First cold snap of the season," Matthew said. "But I had to give the old man a bath."

She went to the fire, standing there with her back turned away from them so she wouldn't embarrass the old man. She could hear the slosh of the warm water as Matthew soaped the rag. He turned towards Arlis. "That was Crawford Gates," he said.

"Yes," she said.

Matthew kept on washing. "Pretty cold for sparking."

She laughed. "We made out," she said. "Did you finish the order?"

He looked up at her and then away. "Why, yes," he said. "Was there anything else you wanted?"

She shook her head. "No." She rubbed her hands together. "It's cold. It'll go down to freezing tonight for sure."

"I reckon you want to ask for him to come to the house," he said bluntly. "Is that what's on your mind?"

She turned to look at him. "Why, no. We'll make out."

He ducked his head and began washing the old man's right leg. "I forbid Crawford the cove—and I meant what I said. But I thought you might be wanting me to change my mind."

"I wouldn't ask you to change your mind," she said calmly. "If you don't want him in the cove, I can meet him outside."

He helped the old man step out of the tub and began to towel him. He was baffled by Arlis; he had never seen her this way, so sure, yet so casual. He sighed. "Well, it comes to every father in time. His girl's got to marry or be an old maid. I reckon you'll be leaving before long, now."

"No, Papa," she said. "I'm not leaving you."

"You——" He stopped in surprise.

"I said I wasn't leaving you, Papa," she said. "And I mean it. I love Crawford, but I'm not going to marry him, Papa. Not until I stand before you and hear you give me your permission."

He was moved. There was a tightness in his chest. "My daughter," he said. "My daughter." He couldn't go on.

She walked to the kitchen door. "By the time you've finished here, I'll have some coffee made." She smiled at him. "Nothing like a cup of fresh hot coffee on the first night of freeze."

The door closed behind her. Matthew towelled the old man and sat him down in the chair to rest before putting him to bed.

"Papa," he said. "Arlis has got a fellow. Arlis has herself a beau."

Perhaps it was the stimulation of the bath. But this time the old man understood. He cackled with laughter. He leaned over himself, holding his throat with the strain, and laughed a ribald cackling to show that he understood.

Chapter 7

SPRING, 1937, came to Dunbar's Cove, bringing work and restlessness. The trees were webby with light green against the sky and the birds returned, their plump bodies trembling with the frantic joy of singing in the soft early mornings.

It had been a changing winter for Matthew. At pig-killing time, he had taken fresh pork, as was the custom, to the neighbours, and, for the first time, searching the coves, he knew Crawford was right. Some houses were already deserted; the rest were arranging to move out, even

though they had another year to do it. All right, Matthew had told himself: work out now what to do and how to do it.

He had known the need for planning all along, even while he had sat still just hoping. Now he needed to bestir himself, put himself one move ahead of the T.V.A. With no neighbours, he would have to do it alone. So, through the winter, while Arlis and Crawford still courted in the car, while winter chores were done, Matthew turned over plans, without finding one to suit him. And meantime, Knox worked on the dam, driving a bulldozer now, coming home only to stay at Christmas; and Jesse John moved from job to job, dam site to dam site, searching, asking questions.

Spring moved in Dunbar's Cove; in Crawford and Arlis in the car down on the river road; in Miss Hattie, rambling artless and unsatisfied through the cove, her mood as random as the flight of a bird. Matthew remembered in the warm nights the early days of his marriage, when his bed had been filled with the great bulk of Canna, and he was glad each night of the tiredness from the day's work.

And Rice.

He had met her first at Wednesday-night prayer meeting. As early as February he had taken the habit of dressing in slacks and white shirt at night and going into town to wait for miracles round the front of the drug-store, to see the pictures, or to go to the nearer-by church on the nights there was a preaching or a social. And then one night he saw her.

He was sitting on a side bench at the prayer meeting, near a window, when her face swam towards him out of the cluster of faces. She was a little girl, tiny even, with brown hair, and a softness in her lips. Her eyes were wide, brown, serious, and her name was Jo Ann Allbright. She had been at grammar school and high school with him, he remembered, though he had never really known her. But now he could not take his eyes away from her face. She saw him looking and for an instant she stared back, startled, before she dropped her eyes again to her hymn book.

He waited outside until she came from the church and walked away with her brother. Then he followed them down the road, walking with a group of boys, and that night he did not sleep for a long time. With

Charlene gone, he had thought it was all over, believing that he could not love again. And now it was all changed in the moment; Charlene had become a dim memory.

He went twice to church again, seeing her both times, sitting where he could watch her profile. She did not once turn, but he felt she marked his presence. She sat very still on the bench, so tiny, so fragile, his hands ached to hold her. Each time he stood aside and saw her walk away from the church with her family, and each time he followed lonely down the road in the middle of a cluster of boys.

At home his mood changed, too. He worked furiously alongside Matthew in the field, liking the start of sweat on his body. Between them they had a job of ploughing to do. They rested the mules by ploughing the two teams turn about, letting each pair out to pasture on alternate days. But there was no rest for their bodies, though Matthew had cut the cotton acreage drastically, was putting in more hay and Indian corn, and had driven a small herd of young bullocks into the pasture to fatten and sell. He romped and teased with Miss Hattie, driving her into a frenzy of pleasure or annoyance as the mood struck her. Matthew watched him without comment, in amazement. He was glad, whatever the reason, and he did not inquire about it.

The third time, Rice waited on the doorstep of the church for her to appear before the service, for he had noted that she came alone, separate from her family, and only accompanied them home. He felt the stiffness of embarrassment when she came into sight. "Jo Ann," he said, his voice abrupt, blurring; and he put out a hand to stay her. "Hello, Jo Ann."

She stopped, "Why, hello, Rice," she said, smiling at him, and he was overwhelmed by the smile.

He looked down at her tiny figure and wished desperately that he had not come. He felt fourteen again, asking for his first date. "Jo Ann," he said. "I . . . let me walk you home tonight."

She paused perceptibly, as though she were considering. "All right," she said at last, after an agonizing time in which he was sure she would deny him. "I'd be glad to walk with you."

She went on into church. He let out a deep breath, then he laughed. It was going to be a good spring, after all.

At the end of the service he met her at the steps, stiff again, but she only smiled, taking his arm with an easy, natural manner as though they had always been walking. He was very tall beside her and he had to stoop to hear her casual voice.

Soon they were alone on the dark road, walking as slowly as possible. Rice cleared his throat. "I've been wanting to walk you home," he said.

She looked up at him. "I've been waiting for you to ask."

With her admission, he put his hand on her hand where it rested lightly on his arm. She promptly took the hand away and they walked separately for a time. Then he replaced her hand under his elbow and she did not remove it this time when he covered it with his own.

"I thought you were going with Charlene," she said.

"Oh," he said carelessly. "I haven't gone with Charlene for a long time. It's been nearly a year."

"She's mighty pretty," Jo Ann said.

"Yeah," Rice said. "If you like red hair." He looked at her hair. "My own favourite is brown."

She smiled at him, and they walked on together. There was a friendly, comfortable easiness between them that he had never felt with Charlene. With Charlene there had always been tenseness.

"Listen, Jo," Rice said. "Can I see you again?"

"How did you know I don't like to be called Jo Ann?" she said, pleased.

He shook his head, laughing. "I didn't. Jo just seems to fit you better. What about next Sunday night—all right?"

And they walked on, friendly and close in the beginning of a new love. It was different from Charlene, in a way Rice could not have told, but it came from the differentness of Jo. She was quiet, reserved, friendly in a way he had never known. Within two weeks he was taking her to church instead of only walking her home, sitting with her during the service, singing with her from the same hymn book, each of them holding a corner.

Because she was so quiet and demure he was a little afraid of her and did not even kiss her for a long time. But that was all right, too. She fought him silently the first time, turning her face away, and he felt the

silken slide of her cheek under his lips. He laughed a small laugh, excited, and then he put his hand on her chin to find her lips, finding too a panicky response, a sudden opening and giving, that left him breathless. She was very strong in clinging to him, stronger than he had imagined she could be. She drew away, shuddering, her face hidden again, and he stood breathless, watching her. "Jo," he said.

He could hear the crying in her voice. She said, "I guess you're satisfied now."

"Jo," he said, broken with her hurt. "It was just a friendly kiss."

She flung her voice at him. "You kept on. On and on and on. You get a girl all stirred up. And then it's just a kiss."

He put his arms round her, awe-shaken at the power of her feeling. She was such a tiny, quiet, happy girl.

"You've got no right," Jo said. "You can't just kiss and go away and kiss somebody else. You take me walking for weeks and don't say a word about kissing and then all of a sudden—" She drew away and dabbed at her face with her handkerchief. "Give me a cigarette," she said. He was startled into immobility at her demand. "I said—give me a cigarette."

He handed her one, held the match for her, watched her puff furiously. She choked on the first puff but then she managed. She tossed back her head, blowing the smoke straight up into the dark air.

"I reckon you count on being another Knox Dunbar," she said. "Running over the county, kissing everything in sight."

"I know Knox did," he protested, "but I . . ."

She puffed at the cigarette again, flung it away from her. "I'd better not hear of it," she said grimly. "And when you think about kissing *me* . . ." She stood on tiptoe and laid her mouth against his, her small hands clenching at his ribs. "You'd better mean it. You hear me?" Her voice was fierce, even mock-savage—and very, very serious. He loved her for the seriousness, in laughter and exasperation, and he felt both troubled and happy. He had never known a girl who would say out her meaning in just that plain and open fashion. He did not kiss her again that night, only holding her hand for a long moment on bidding her good-bye.

As for Jo—she watched him go, feeling the love move in her that she had lived with for a long time now, ever since high school when he had been one grade ahead of her, a tall, lean, speedy forward in the basketball team. He had been shocked by her openness, she knew; he did not know that it had been building in her since high school, that she had walked and sauntered before him at church and dance and school, dreaming of his eye picking her out from the crowd. She had felt bitter jealousy when he appeared with the dish-faced Charlene. And now, at last, he had seen her, the ample reward for all her long waiting.

When she went into the house her mother was waiting up for her. "You're taking a long time to walk home from church these nights," she said with mild disapproval.

"Don't wait up for me, Mother," she said flippantly. And then she looked at her, woman to woman. "Because I'm going to marry that boy, Mama."

RICE TRIED to go slowly, thoughtfully, thinking about the knowledge he had faced tonight. He understood the conditions as well as she, though they had not been formulated into words. She was his, to walk and talk with, to kiss and make love. But it was real, it was not a play-toy, and when he laid his hand to her there would be no turning back.

He wanted to think about it, to decide seriously whether he wanted her so badly. But he could not think. The spring was bubbling in his blood and his step was light on the dark road. He stopped to take off his shoes, to feel the cool night-time dust squish between his toes in the way he remembered from his childhood, and moved whistling, his hands in his pockets, the polished shoes looped by the strings round his neck, bouncing on his chest as he sprinted and cavorted in the road. His bare feet were light and easy and he thought, She wants to put shoes on our love. The women always want a love time with the comfort of good shoes. But a man ought to be free and light in the springtime.

When Rice saw the dark bulk of the car at the entrance to the cove, he stopped whistling and moved more slowly until he could hear voices murmuring. He went to the side of the car and put his head into the window.

"Why the hell don't you two get married?" he said.

They sat apart from each other, abruptly. "Rice!" Arlis said. "You've got no right to come sneaking . . ."

He grinned. "You could have heard me coming for half a mile—if you'd been listening."

Crawford laughed. "I heard him. I just didn't pay him any heed."

Rice leaned on the window. "Old folks like you-all oughtn't to be setting out in no car. Why don't you cut out this foolishness?"

Arlis laughed. "Maybe we enjoy our foolishness, Rice. Just like you."

Rice looked back up the road the way he had come. "I'll tell you one thing," he said. "It ain't no foolishness where I've just come from. It's anything but that." He looked back at them. "You know, I can tell you just exactly what a coon feels like when he's hungry before a baited trap. I know just what starts up in him in the way of wanting and fear."

"You've got the moon madness, Rice Dunbar," Arlis said, her voice slightly exasperated.

Rice stood back from the car. "It spreads like malaria this time of the year. Well, don't let the night dew settle in your rheumatism," he said. Moving away, he stopped and hollered back at them. "I know one sure way to get married, anyhow. A way where Papa wouldn't object." He laughed, wild and happy. "In fact, he'd probably be glad to hold the shotgun for you."

They laughed together at his departure, and then Crawford said, "He's right, you know. Matthew couldn't say us nay, then."

"That's all you think about now," Arlis turned away. "Not about love or getting married or T.V.A. You just want——"

"It's been a long time," he said with angry urgency. "Too long, Arlis. We can't just go on night after night, forbidding our love."

"We're together," Arlis said. "That's all that counts. We can see each other and talk to each other and hold hands. He hasn't denied us that, has he?"

"No," Crawford said bitterly. "He's given us that much."

They sat silently. Crawford smoked quietly, letting the blood simmer down. "I'm sorry," he said at last. "It's just . . ."

She turned towards him. "I know, Crawford," she said. "I know. But he'll change in time, if we can just wait."

He flipped the cigarette out of the window. "I'm going to talk to him," he said firmly. "We'll be getting the rheumatism from the night damp before we ever get married at this rate." His voice changed, his arms reaching for her. "Now, come here."

THE NEXT DAY, Matthew left off ploughing for an hour or so. When he returned, from far down the field road, he saw both mules moving; someone was ploughing in his place. He hurried on, wondering, and then he saw that it was Crawford Gates, wending up and down the rows, passing and repassing Rice in his turns.

Rice came to the end towards Matthew and turned, grinning and jerking his head towards Crawford in the distance. He ploughed on away again. They were cutting away the old cotton rows in a curling wave of fresh-turned earth. Matthew waited for Crawford to plough down towards him.

"Hello, Mr. Matthew," Crawford called cheerily. "I've been waiting to talk to you."

Matthew was forced to grin. "You've been doing a mighty useful piece of waiting. How long have you been ploughing in my place?"

Crawford laughed, wiping the sweat from his face. "You were gone a long day for me, Mr. Matthew. It's been a time since I've done any ploughing."

Matthew looked down the rows. He could not tell the difference where he had left off and Crawford had started. "You're doing a mighty job of it, anyway. Maybe I'd better just leave you to it."

Crawford turned to look, too. "I like to plough," he said. "Not that I ever did much of it. But I like to walk along there and watch the black earth break over. It's a pretty sight."

Matthew stood watching him. Crawford was breathing deep, steadily, and his shirt was damp with sweat. There was black earth on his shoes and while they talked he was turning the shiny plough-share to one side and scraping his shoe with it. He straightened up the plough again and looped the lines round the handle. "I didn't come to do your

ploughing for you, though," he said. "I come to talk to you, Mr. Matthew."

Matthew stiffened. This was the way of Crawford; he came friendly and open, making Matthew feel a welcoming warmth. And then came the talking, the fending, the battle. "If you're going to talk about the T.V.A . . ." he said warningly.

"This time," Crawford said, "I'm here on my own account."

Matthew turned away. "I don't aim to discuss it."

Crawford had come into the cove loaded with the anger of their nights in the car, lonely with love and wanting. Behind him were the lonely years; the saw-milling, the C.C.C. camps, the T.V.A. work. Now he wanted a house of his own, and Arlis, and their children. And here was Matthew turned away from him, brushing away the friendliness with which Crawford had come to him, the manly warmth and closeness that lay between them underneath their differences. He had hoped that Matthew would approve of his ploughing, as he had always hoped for his own father's approval. And when Matthew had commented on the even, professional quality of his work he felt as if he had been given a medal.

They should have been as close as father and son, Matthew and he, for they were alike in their habits and values. But the clash of tradition and of new vast endeavours could only generate anger and strife between them.

Crawford stepped towards Matthew. "You can't deny the humanness in us, Matthew," he said. "Don't you see what you're driving us to?" He stopped, for Rice was ploughing near them. He waited until Rice had turned and gone away again, looking curiously towards them. "Listen, Matthew. Arlis is a good girl. She doesn't want to take her love in the seat of a motor-car. She's fought me and she's fought herself."

"That's the way I brought her up."

It was like trying to batter away one of the T.V.A. dams with a puny sledge-hammer. Crawford felt his hands curling into fists and he stopped them, consciously. "That's the way you brought her up," he said. "It was a good bringing up." The words were tight in his throat. "But now you're driving her too far."

Matthew stared into Crawford's face. "You can come threatening me all you want," he said. "But I know Arlis. She's my girl, she's Dunbar I can trust her until the day I give the word of my mouth."

Crawford felt bafflement and anger. "What do you want?" he said. "What in the world do you want?"

Matthew looked at Crawford, thinking he would have been proud of him as son-in-law if the T.V.A., the different ideas, had not come between them. "I want you to leave us alone," he said.

"What about Arlis?" Crawford said. "What about her?"

"Arlis is a Dunbar," Matthew said steadily. "She wants what's good for the Dunbar blood and the Dunbar earth. There'll come another man fit and right for her, one I can take into the family here in the cove."

Silence fell between them. Crawford stood uncertainly for a moment, then he sat down and took off his shoes, shaking the soil out of them.



He put them on again, carefully, while Matthew sat on the plough stock watching him.

"You're mixing me up with the T.V.A.," Crawford said then. "I'm not the T.V.A. I'm one man who happens to work for the T.V.A. and I'm proud of the job I'm doing. But that's no reason for you . . ."

"But you were the one who came," Matthew said. "You were the one who said I had to abandon everything that's Dunbar."

"Then I can marry Arlis if I quit my job?"

Matthew looked down. "It's not that simple, son. It's the way you feel and the way I feel mixed up together."

"No," Crawford said. "It's not that simple. For I'm not going to quit the T.V.A."

They sat silent again. Then Matthew said, "What is the T.V.A. going to do? Just what's going to happen?"

"You still have time. You'll finish this crop. They won't move until the very end, until they've persuaded all who can be persuaded."

"And then?" Matthew said. He wanted to know, now, the extent and the nearness of danger. Knowledge came before fighting.

"And then," Crawford said uncomfortably, "then they'll condemn the property. They'll decide before a fair board of men what it's worth and they'll serve the papers on you. You'll have to leave."

"What can they do if I refuse to go? Can they turn the water in on me? While I'm sitting on my front doorstep?"

"It's never been done. But they've *got* to flood the land."

Matthew pressed on. "Would they come with guns?" he said.

"I don't know," Crawford said, exasperated. "They can make you leave, though. Remember that. You can't stand, one man alone, in the way of the whole country."

"I will," Matthew said. "I'm going to stand on my land and turn the water away from my door. You can go and tell your boss I said it. Tell him you talked yourself blind in the face persuading me—but it didn't do any good."

Crawford stared at him. "Matthew," he said. "You can't quit the world you live in. You can't be like that King who commanded the seas not to wet his feet."

Matthew smiled. "When you first come here, you called me Mr. Dunbar. Then you started calling me Mr. Matthew. Now you're first-naming me, a man nearly old enough to be your father."

Without meaning to, Crawford stepped towards Matthew, gripping his arm. "Take thought, Matthew," he said. "You're a good man, who's lived a fine life, a man I'd have been proud to call my own daddy. Don't twist it up now, don't—"

Matthew moved free of Crawford's grasp. "You can't persuade me, son," he said. "I've done told you that."

Crawford stood straight before him. The loss lay deep in them both, and Crawford felt he would cry, as he had cried at the death of his father. And to Matthew—it was Knox going away from him again, only a deeper hurt this time.

Crawford reached out his hand, then drew it back without touching Matthew. Then he walked away.

Chapter 8

IT WAS a beautiful spring. It seemed as though that year in the cove was making a special effort to be everything that Dunbar's Cove had been designed for. The feathery green in the trees deepened, and the guineas led lean and agile offspring into the thicket wilderness to teach them remoteness from men. The sows littered, Matthew coming out in the early mornings to see the delicate neat-toed cleanness of new pigs nuzzling the grunting sow. The new young bullocks in the pasture grew and frolicked, fat and sleek, their red hides glistening health. The first plantings came up thick and green, growing inches overnight, and Rice swore that he could detect the sound of their growing.

But Matthew was absorbed, preoccupied. At table, he was silent, and his silence put an oppression into the house. Even Miss Hattie was afraid to approach him.

For Matthew was thinking hard now. He had not much time left to act. He took the habit of sitting each night after supper, and sometimes in the daytime, with the old man. The old man was used to being

solitary, for the family tended to ignore him except for feeding him and clothing him. But Matthew felt a comfort in sitting opposite him at the flickering fire talking to him, looking into his old, milky blue eyes. "I still don't know what to do, Papa," he said one day. "This T.V.A. is a big thing. It's laid a mighty hand on the land and I'm caught between two of the fingers. What would you do, Papa? What would your daddy have done?"

The old man did not hear. He dreamed into the flames, and Matthew could not reach him.

In the silence, far in the distance Matthew felt a dull thump, a muffled booming, and he winced with the sound. Once that had been a happy kind of noise, for it was like the gunpowder that countrymen boom off with anvils and sledge-hammers at Christmastime. But this was the calculated destruction of dynamite. The T.V.A. was blowing stumps out of the reservoir area, cleaning the ground where the water would flow. It was a constant accompaniment of the day now, coming at irregular and unexpected intervals, one, two or three explosions booming one after the other, and Matthew could not get used to it.

"What can one man do, Papa?" Matthew said again. He stared into the fire with the old man. "But one man put the Dunbar into this cove," he said sombrely. "One man alone. So one man . . . What would you do, Papa?" he said. "Tell me what you would do."

The old man stirred, lifted his head, looked at him.

"Papa." He stood up and shook the old man's shoulder. "Listen to me, Papa. We're going to lose the cove. You'll have to die in a strange house." He stooped, putting his face directly into the old man's.

But it was no good.

Matthew straightened up and went out through the kitchen, passing Arlis without speaking.

Rice had already gone on to the field. Miss Hattie came from the barn to walk silently alongside Matthew and he felt her friendly companionship. She was wearing a pair of overalls and one of Rice's shirts and her feet were bare in the dust. Yesterday she had worn a starched dress and some of Arlis's lipstick and powder, and she had spent the afternoon sitting primly in the front porch looking down the road. Matthew knew

that each day she carefully laundered the sheer undergarments they had bought last autumn and, whatever her outward garb, she always wore them next to her skin. Soon she would abandon the erratic reversal into childhood—and then she would be a young woman. It was an ache in Matthew to think about it, wondering if she, too, would draw away from him into the arms of a man he could not approve.

"Gonna help me plough today?" he said, reaching for the old close comradeship between them. Once she had spent days with him in the field, riding his mule high up on the withers. He would let her guide the mule for him, geeing and hawing in a big voice as she pulled the mule round at the end of the row.

She fished a ball of twine from her back pocket. "I'm going fishing," she said. "It's too hot out in that field."

Before they reached the place of work she turned away, lifting a hand to him. Her skinny body was fuller, now, beginning to curve like a woman's, and her walk had changed, too. She would fish through the afternoon, as she did so often every spring of her life, but now she would idle through the hours with a dream of the male who would come; lolling, unwatchful of the cork, letting the time and the fish slip away from her.

Matthew had stopped, watching her. Now he started on again. His mule was hitched waiting for him in the shade of a sweet-gum tree. They were turning the first grass in a cornfield and the corn was already nearly knee-high. Rice's mule was standing hitched to the plough, he had dragged the plough over the rows trying to eat the corn through his muzzle. He had broken and bruised some of the young stalks but he had tangled himself in the traces before causing too much damage. Now he was waiting patiently for rescue from his predicament. Matthew went to him and unhitched the traces so that the gear could be straightened out. He stood up from the task and looked for Rice. Then he saw him coming from the pasture. He was panting hard, sweating, when he arrived. "Three of those young bullocks got out," he told Matthew. "They sure can run." He sat down on the ground, wiping the sweat from his face. "I like to never run down one of them."

"Did they break the fence?" Matthew said.

"No; must have just jumped it, or something. If we had milk cows instead of that wild beef stock . . ." Rice stopped, abruptly, and stood up. "I reckon I'd better get on back to work now."

Matthew looked at him. "We'll walk that fence when we quit work," he said. "Must be a loose strand somewhere. I don't think they could jump it."

He kept on looking at Rice. He was the last now. He stayed with Matthew, in the fields with him every day, working as hard as he did. And he liked it, Matthew knew, in spite of the dream he held about dairy farming. Rice liked the feel of the plough in his hand, the curl of earth over the shiny wing, the lilt and swing of mocking-birds in the sweet-gums along the edges of the field, the growth of the growing things. He had told Matthew about how he heard the sound of growing in the night, and Matthew knew he had walked here in moonlight, absorbed in the night-time feel of the fields about him. Matthew had done that, too, when he was young. *I could have a worse choosing*, Matthew thought, looking upon his youngest son.

He hitched up his mule and started ploughing. The sun beat down on his back, feeling warm and wanted there, and the sweat was starting on him. He always ploughed in an overall jumper that would start the sweat quickly and hold it close to his body. At first it was very hot but after the perspiration started the jumper would become damp and cool with evaporation. The boys, never understanding that principle, wore thin shirts with the sleeves rolled up above their elbows, letting the sweat dry immediately from their bodies.

He concentrated on the ploughing, absorbing himself into the rhythm of the work. He passed and repassed Rice, each time judging him nearer, nearer, by the jungle of his mule's harness and the low whistling between his teeth, then fading away again into silence and distance.

Finally he stopped at one end and led the mule into the shade of a tree. The sweat was black on the mule's flanks. Rice pulled up beside him, grinning. "You gonna work that mule down to a nub, Papa," he said. "I wondered if you was going to blow him at all."

Matthew laughed. "He goes on four feet, while I just go on two," he said. "He ought to outlast me." He squatted down on his heels and

started rolling a cigarette. "Better give your own a little rest too, son."

"Yes sir," Rice said. He led the mule into the shade and sat down to shake out his shoes. "We ought to get done with this field before very long, now."

"Yes," Matthew said. He lit the cigarette and stuck the flaming match into the earth, quenching it immediately. "Son, you're eighteen now and you're doing a man's work . . . have been for some time."

Rice stiffened against the strange gravity of the words. "Yes sir."

Matthew haunched back on his heels, the cigarette in one corner of his mouth, the smoke curling into his eyes. He took it out and shook the ash from it. He said, "You know, I reckon, that when Jesse John and Knox come eighteen on me, I started paying them their share for the work they done. I ain't done that for you as yet—I've just give you pocket money."

Rice was beginning to savour the goodness of it now. He started to smile. "Yes sir. I'd be mighty proud to have my own money."

"You're due your share," Matthew went on. "In fact, I reckon I owe you for last autumn, too, when we gathered that crop all to ourselves. So you'll have a fair sum in your hand."

"I thank you, Papa," Rice said. "And I'll work hard."

"I know you will," Matthew said quickly. "You ain't never slacked on me yet, Rice. And you can do as you see fit with your own money. You can spend it on women like Knox did, you can squirrel it away—or you can buy yourself some dairy stock."

"Papa!" Rice said.

Matthew lifted a hand. "If you got the desire to handle dairy stock with your own money, I won't say a word to stop you," he said. "You can pasture them with my young bullocks. I'll even give you acreage to raise their feed on—acreage you'll have to work by yourself"—he grinned—"unless you can persuade me to work for you by the day."

Rice stood up. "I'll have me a barn," he said. "A big, heated barn, and I'll have me a truck to deliver. I'll buy Holsteins; they're the best milkers. And a fine bull to breed them by." He stopped, turning towards Matthew. "Papa, I—" He choked on the words.

Matthew stood up, too, putting out the cigarette. "I don't reckon you'll

do all that tomorrow," he said. "But you can get yourself a couple of milkers for a starter. You can strain the milk and have the milk truck pick it up every morning. They'll leave you a cheque every two weeks and with your cheque . . ." he shrugged, going to the plough. "Why, maybe by the time I'm ready to set down like your Grandpaw, you *will* have that big barn and all them fine cows." He smiled. "And even a grand bull to keep 'em happy."

He wouldn't lose Rice, now—there wouldn't be any way to lose him. He turned the mule and ploughed away very quickly. Rice stood looking after him. He felt like crying, and he felt like laughing. All the time he had nurtured the idea of the beautiful milkers, knowing that Matthew would not listen to him, that he was too young; and now suddenly Matthew had given him the beginning of the dream. *I'll tell Jo tonight*, he thought immediately. No, she said not to come tonight; her folks have guests. She said to come tomorrow, her parents would be gone all day. *Early tomorrow I'll tell her and then!* Then, maybe, he would have the courage to meet her terms, to possess her at last.

THE NEXT morning Rice was awakened by a sound. He came awake quickly, wondering about the day and the sound and the instant stir of anticipation. Then he sat up in bed, knowing and recognizing at the same time. The sound was the boom of dynamite, and the day was the day. He jumped out of bed and slipped on an old pair of overalls, running down the passageway and towards the swimming hole in the creek. The water was cold, chill with the night, and he shivered with the sudden plunge. He had forgotten soap and towel and he scrubbed himself with the flat of his hands, feeling the hard, frictioned rubbing of fresh, unsoaped water. He looked down at himself in the water, and the joy of living was in him. He came out of the water, dried on the old overalls, and put them on to wear back to his room. There, he dressed in slacks and an open-necked shirt and went into the kitchen. Breakfast was on the table and he slipped into his place, Arlis coming to fill his plate from the skillet.

Matthew looked at him wryly. "You gonna get them pretty clothes mighty dirty, ploughing in them," he observed.

Rice looked up at him, grinning. "I thought I told you yesterday. I didn't have it in mind, sir, to work today."

Matthew laughed. "Yesterday I make a partner out of you. And today you quit on me."

Rice frowned. "I'll be there tomorrow and every day after that, Papa. It's just that today . . ."

Matthew stopped him with his hand. "I can get along without you," he said. "Go on about your business." He grinned. "And have a good time with it. Your girl must be waiting for you, the way you're all dressed up."

Rice laughed. "I reckon that ain't none of your concern, sir," he said, feeling happy with the manly impertinence.

Matthew stood up from the table, then turned back. "I've got that money I owe you now. You want me to keep it until tomorrow? If I was you, I wouldn't trust myself on a day like this with anything like money."

"I'd be pleased to take it," Rice said eagerly.

Matthew took out his purse, dug out the roll of bills and slowly counted some of them on the table. "There you are. We're all even now. You're gonna have to work a while before you get any more."

"Yes sir," Rice said, staring down at the money. "I ain't never had a pile of money like that in my whole life."

"Well, don't spend it all on one cow," Matthew said.

"But that's just what I aim to do," Rice said, laughing. "One real fine cow. A registered Holstein."

He ate his breakfast hurriedly and went out of the house. He should wait a while, he knew, but he could not wait. He would go on over, and wait there until he saw her family leaving.

He cut away from the road, going up over the thickety hill towards the big T.V.A. clearing to take the short, quick way to her house. He had never felt so young in his life. He cavorted like a fourteen-year-old, half running in his hurry. He sped out of the low bushes across the sharp demarcation into the land cleared by the reservoir crews. He put his head down, feeling the welcome strength pumping in his legs, and he was a man and a child at the same time.

He did not see the cluster of men far away at the other edge of the clearing until their shouting voices reached to him. He stopped, seeing them, and leaped up on a stump, waving to answer their greeting. He heard the shouts, the sharp, terrifying whistle, and saw the red flags. Somewhere near him a stump erupted suddenly into the air and then another, closer, and earth showered over him. He looked down, bewildered, and saw the thin curl of smoke from the sticks of dynamite.

He had just time to recognize them before the fresh morning world blew up in his face.

IT WAS a clear, bright, sunshiny day. In the barn-yard mules were hitched along the fence, so thick it looked like a trading barn, and there were many cars parked in the yard and alongside the road leading up from the head of the cove. They were old cars, mud-splashed on the wings, the upholstery torn and worn. Only Knox's new car was different, standing out startlingly from the others. In the back yard there was a cluster of children, ill at ease in their Sunday clothes because they knew they were forbidden to play. Once in a while a scuffle or bubble of laughter would rise among them, dying away quickly as an adult looked at them balefully. One boy, at the back of the group, was sitting on the ground, his legs outstretched to make an area where he could play surreptitiously with two marbles. He was surrounded by an envious group of watchers.

In the kitchen Miz Anson, from down the road, was cooking a big meal. She knew there would be a houseful to feed by suppertime and it was her way of honouring the dead. Arlis was lying down on her bed. She had wept yesterday until there were no tears left for weeping, and her eyes felt dry and feverish. Last night she had not slept at all and now she felt that, in spite of everything, she could have slept except for the nagging feeling that somehow it would be a betrayal of grief to do so. She sat up, finally, on the side of the bed, thinking that she had not seen Miss Hattie all morning. Shuffling into her shoes, she left her room, moving with the arthritic stiffness of an old woman, and went into the kitchen.

"Have you seen Miss Hattie?" she asked Miz Anson.

"I sure haven't, Arlis." She looked into her face. "You need to set down here and have a good cup of coffee."

Arlis shook her head. "I've got to find Miss Hattie."

She went out in the back porch, casting her eye towards the barn; she knew Miss Hattie would not be with the children. They fell completely silent, regarding her as she walked across the yard into the barn-yard. She heard the swish of a mule's tail against the bite of a horsefly, and the stamp of a foot. A calf bawled in the far distance of the pasture and the sound was long and mournful on the air. She looked into the corn crib but it was empty. Stuffy she climbed the ladder into the hayloft and looked, calling Miss Hattie softly, but it too was empty. She climbed down again and stood in the barn hallway irresolutely. She was beginning to be afraid. Then she felt a chuckle rise in her and she stopped it, horrified that she could feel a levity on this day. She knew where Miss Hattie would be hiding. She went quickly out of the back of the barn and circled round the thicket. She stooped, pushing her way in through the thick, stiff, gouging limbs, and then creeping on her hands and knees towards the centre.

Miss Hattie sat stonily, watching Arlis creep towards her. Her face was dirty, tear-streaked, and she had dirtied her clean dress. She had been here all morning, listening to the arrival of teams and cars, the hum of voices in the yard. There were too many of them; more than she could ever face knowing that they would peer into her, searching into the depth and intensity of her grief. She did not intend to emerge until they were gone.

Arlis squatted beside Miss Hattie in the little centre clearing. This was the heart of Miss Hattie's old system of roads and her fleet of brown snuff-bottles was flanked neatly alongside one edge of the clearing. "I've been looking all over the place for you," Arlis said.

Miss Hattie was dumb, staring into her face. Arlis and Matthew moved among the visitors, talking as they did on normal days. They seemed to contain their sorrow better than she could. She could not face the world.

"Just look at you," Arlis said. "You ought to see your face. And that dress I put on you clean this morning."

"I don't care!" Miss Hattie said. She hid her face. Arlis put an arm round her. She felt better now, stronger, because she had Miss Hattie to look after.

Miss Hattie could not yield to her elder sister's strength. They're all strong, she thought aggressively. They can all carry their faces calm and unshowing before the world. But they had not seen it, the way she had. They knew only the fact of death, not the fact of dying.

For yesterday Miss Hattie had followed Rice from the house in curiosity. She had never seen him so happy and she had wondered what he planned to do. She had been close behind him as he cut up the hill cavorting like a colt. She had had to run to keep up with him. She had topped the crest of the hill just in time to see him run out into the clearing, had seen the men waving at him and Rice leaping gaily up on to the stump to wave back. Then—then she had seen the eruptions of dynamite, and Rice's body tumbling in the air.

She had wanted to go to him. But she could not force herself out of the protection of the brush into the nakedness and death of the clearing. She panicked. Her mouth opened to scream but no scream came out. Black with panic, she whirled and ran away down into the cove, racing a stitch into her side and then out again, racing herself out of breath and then into her second wind, and when that was almost exhausted she finally reached Matthew in the field.

He knew something was wrong the instant he saw her coming. He dropped the plough in mid-stride, trotting to meet her, and catching her in his arms. "What's the matter?" he said.

"Rice." She pointed back the way she had come. "There. Dynamite. He . . ."

Matthew whirled back to the plough, unhitching the mule. He clambered aboard and whipped the mule with the rope bridle rein, the mule lunging surprised into a dead run, flinging earth high in the air from his rear hoofs. And Miss Hattie lay down in the cornfield middle, her stomach retching out the breakfast she had eaten such a short time before, such a century ago. None of the others had that. She alone carried the burden of both the dying and the death. But she felt better now, having decided that, and Arlis's arm round her shoulders was a

definite comfort. She leaned against her sister and after a while she said, "I can't go out there, Arlis. I just can't."

Arlis did not answer her, just holding her, letting her presence settle into Miss Hattie. They sat so quietly that the flock of guineas filed through the clearing before them without sensing their presence.

"Don't you want to see him buried?" Arlis said at last, gently.

Miss Hattie shook her head violently. "No," she said. "No."

Arlis sat away from her, looking into her face. "All right," she said quietly. "You don't have to. But I've got to get back now." She started back towards the yard, the branches tangling and mussing her hair. She stopped and looked back. "But Papa is going to need you," she said. "He needs all of us."

Miss Hattie stiffened against her words, waiting until Arlis had gone. But the words stayed with her. At last, almost defiantly, she stood up. All right, she thought. *All right!*

She came out of the thicket. She marched straight across the yard past the staring, silent children. One boy was sitting on the ground, his legs outstretched, and she could hear the click of marble against marble. She stopped, looking at him until he stopped, too, glancing up abashed into her face. The words were calm and authoritative in her mind, *You just put them marbles into your pocket right now*, but she did not have to say them. His grubby hand reached out blindly, fumbled the marbles out of sight. Satisfied, she went on into the house.

Knox sat slumped under the wheel of the new car, his hands slipping idly round the smooth rim almost as though he were playing driver as he had when a child. A man approached him deferentially, stooping into the car window.

"Your daddy wanted me to ask you," he said. "Do you know any way to let Jesse John know? Do you know where he is?"

Knox turned his head slowly to look at him. This was the third time he had been asked the question since his arrival, each time by a different man. And he knew it did not come from Matthew, for he had talked to Matthew about it immediately upon his arrival, discussing it in calm, businesslike tones. "No," Knox said. "I don't know where he is."

The man went away, leaving him alone. He knew they were worried

about him—not Matthew and Arlis, but his relatives and the neighbours. For he had gone only briefly into the house to talk to Matthew, and then he had come back to sit silent in his car through the darkness and into the morning. Another shadow was at his elbow now: Uncle John.

"Knox," Uncle John said. "Don't you want to look at him, Knox? I'll go in with you."

"No." The single word was quiet and explosive in his mouth.

They did not understand it. They would talk about it for the rest of their lives, how Knox Dunbar had refused to view his own brother's body before he was buried. But he did not care; he was not going to look upon Rice in death. His Uncle John, baffled, went away, and Knox sat on in the new car that would soon be paid for, now. It was the best place to stay for it was the closest thing to him in the entire cove. It was his, and here he was protected. He would stay in the car until the time came to go to the graveyard. It was the only way he could endure the day.

The car door opened and Miss Hattie slid into the seat beside him. She was wearing a blue dress, so freshly ironed that the faint slickness of starch showed on it. She sat primly, her hands in her lap, staring out of the windscreen. After a while she said, "Have you seen him, Knox?"

He shook his head. Miss Hattie shivered. "I haven't, either. They keep telling me I ought to go and look at him."

"I don't know why they consider that so necessary," Knox said bitterly. "Who wants to look at their dead brother?"

Miss Hattie put one hand on her elbow, holding herself as against chill air. "I want to," she said soberly. "But I can't. I saw him, Knox. I saw him die. I followed him because I wanted to know why he was so happy. He went cavorting up that hill and run out into the clearing. And then" She shuddered, hiding her face in her hands.

He put his big, broad hand on her shoulder. "Don't talk about it."

"I can't quit seeing it," she said drearily. "It keeps on going over and over in my mind, the way he went up in the air, and how he looked when he hit the ground, laying there like he hadn't never been alive or happy."

"So now they want you to go and see him again," Knox said. He turned, looking at the crowd in the yard, hating them.

Miss Hattie gulped. "I think it would be better if I did," she said. "If I saw him lying there peaceful-dead instead of violent-dead, I might be able to quit seeing the other. But every time I start in there, I . . ."

"Come on," Knox said. "I'll go with you."

They got out of the car and when she snatched hold of his hand he could feel the trembling of her body. People were watching, but that did not matter. He walked firmly to the porch with Miss Hattie, and into the living-room. Unconsciously, they tiptoed to the coffin as though they might wake the sleeping, and stood looking down at Rice.

He did not look as though he had died by violence, except for a purple bruise on his forehead. There was no longer a youngness in him, but rather an agelessness. They looked at him, at first, with a lurch of recognition. Then the recognition was replaced by a calm and peaceful gazing, as definitive as a farewell, upon the fact of death. Knox could accept it now, instead of refusing to believe it. And Miss Hattie felt a slow erasing of yesterday's vision out of her mind, and she knew that this was the way she would remember Rice. She looked up at Knox. "All right," she said. "Have you finished?"

"Yes. You go outside, now. I'll sit with Papa for a while."

Miss Hattie went out and Knox took a chair beside Matthew, sitting back against the wall. There was nothing to say between them; but he knew that his presence would matter.

Matthew nodded at him when he came, glad that at last Knox had accepted to come into the house. He sat on before the low fire, opposite the old man, and he was alone in the room in spite of Knox and the old man and the dead son in the coffin resting within ten feet of him. He heard without notice the shuffle of feet as new arrivals came to look upon Rice. If they came to him with a solemn handshake and a few thought-out words he answered them in the same careful ceremony and then waited for them to go away and leave him alone again.

John came in. "Matthew," he said softly. "I just called the T.V.A. main office about Jesse John. They say he's not working anywhere in the T.V.A. system, so far as they can find out."

Matthew considered it. "Thank you, John," he said.

John paused delicately. "Do you want to go on waiting?"

"No," Matthew said flatly. "No, we won't wait any longer." It was the only possible decision, and he was glad that at last it had been made. "You talk to the preacher, John," he said. "You do all the necessary."

"Of course," John said quickly. "Don't you worry your head none." He started to leave and stopped. "Matthew," he said. "I forgot. There's a man here to see you. From the T.V.A."

Matthew stirred. "Crawford?"

"No," John said. "The foreman of that dynamite crew."

"All right. Tell him I'm here." Matthew shook his head. "Crawford ought to come, too. Arlis would want him to come."

John paused at the door. "You want me to send for him?"

"No. Not if he don't want to come."

The man from the T.V.A. was big, bulky in his clean khakis. He stood holding his peaked cap in one hand and then in the other. "Mr. Dunbar," he said. "I'd give anything in the world to have kept it from happening. Anything."

Matthew looked up into his face. "I know," he said.

"We do everything we can to make that work safe." The man moved his hands helplessly. "I've been blowing dynamite for ten years, and I've never killed a man before. We stake out red flags and we put men round the area. We blow a whistle. But he just come out of nowhere, it looked like, running out there and jumping up on the stump and waving at us—" He stopped, unable to go on, and Matthew was surprised to see tears in his eyes. This man was crying, while he himself had not yet shed one tear.

Matthew stood up. "It's not your fault," he said. "Don't think I'm blaming you or the T.V.A. It just happened. That boy got up out of bed with death waiting for him, and not a soul could have done anything about it."

"I just wanted to tell you," the man said miserably. He turned quickly and left, his eyes averted from the coffin. Matthew stared after him. A little anger would be a great help now. But there was no anger at all. Matthew went abruptly into the kitchen.

"I need a cup of coffee, Miz Anson," he said.

Three times she had brought coffee to him this morning and three

times he had refused it. She picked up the coffee-pot and went to the table. "You set down right here," she said.

He sat down heavily, drank, and put the cup back into the saucer. "I just can't work it out, Miz Anson," he said. "There's no reason for it. If he had laid down in his bed with a sickness, if he had grown old like the old man . . ."

She put a plump hand on his shoulder. "There's two things you can't understand, Matthew," she said firmly, "and that's living and dying. You can't even think about them, or you'll drive yourself crazy. Go on now and finish your coffee. You're gonna need all your strength."

"Yes," Matthew said, his voice bleak. "I'll need all my strength. And not just for today, either."

And it flashed into his mind, then, at last, after all the months of skullbone-hard thinking, what he was going to do about the T.V.A. It was plain and simple there before him, ready to his hand all this time, and it had taken until this moment to discover it. He could do it, and they could not touch him, and Dunbar's Cove would be saved.

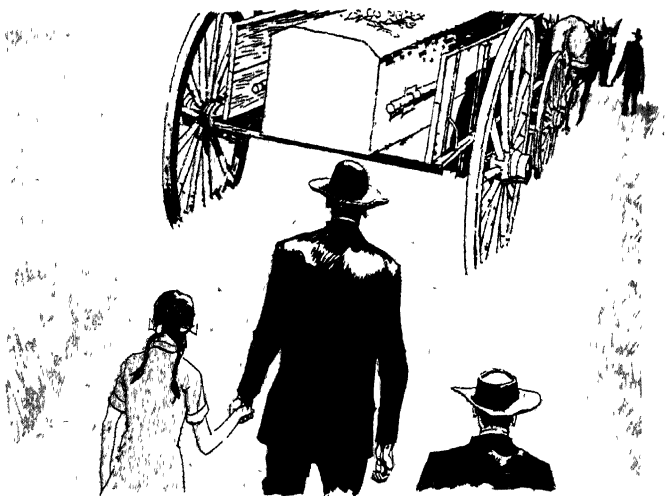
He sat on at the table, drinking the coffee, thinking about the crowd of people outside in the yard. They'll come when there's birth or death or sickness, he thought. Why don't they come to help you at other times, when they could be of help? Why don't they stand with me against the T.V.A., instead of selling out one by one and moving away? But it was an unjust thought, and he pushed it out of his mind. They were good people; they did the good that came to hand.

Arlis walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table, and then Miss Hattie and Knox came in and sat down. Miz Anson brought them coffee, moving softly between stove and table. None of them moved until Uncle John stuck his head in the door and said, "They're ready now, Matthew."

Matthew stood up. "Where's that girl?" he said. "Rice's girl. She ought to be with the family."

John shook his head. "Her daddy says she can't come. They had to call a doctor. He gave her some dope to quiet her down."

Matthew nodded. Tomorrow he would go to her, sit by her bed and hold her hand and give her something of comfort that he did not own



himself. He looked down at the others. "It's time, children," he said.

They stood up and he led them into the suddenly hushed living-room. There were chairs sitting alone in the middle of the room for the immediate family, the crowd stood round the walls. The room was hot, thick with people. There was a constant soft shuffling of feet and clothing, punctuated by a muffled embarrassed cough. The preacher was standing behind the still-open coffin, waiting until the sounds of waiting were hushed, and the room was hot, solemn, and silent under his gaze. He lifted his arms and said, "Number Four-Thirty-Four," and then he started the singing—*Shall we gather at the river?*—the voices swelling into the familiar lines. Then the preacher bowed his head, saying, "Let us pray."

Matthew sat vacant-minded, staring at his shoe-tips, during the following silence. Somewhere a woman sobbed.

The preacher raised his head, and took up his Bible, holding one hand spread-eagled under it, the other splayed on the open pages. "We



take our text today from Job Fourteen, verses seven to nine: *For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease. . . . Yea,*" the preacher went on, "though this young man's body lies in death before us, verily his soul is sprouting forth leaves of gold and silver in heaven. . . ."

Matthew heard the preacher start weaving the old comfort about life and death and eternity, and he saw Arlis bow her head, her body racked with sobs. Miss Hattie was gripping her hand, crying too. But there were no tears in Matthew; he felt his eyes dry and hard and hot as he sat stiffly in the straight chair. The singing started again: *In the sweet by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore.* And then there was an awkward delay until Matthew roused, knowing it was the time.

He stood up, and led the way, the family behind him. He went to the coffin and looked upon the lump of clay that was his son, and one by one the others followed, until the line formed round the room as the entire congregation passed slowly before the coffin. Then it was over

and young men came to lift the coffin and carry it out to the wagon.

A matched team of black mules he did not recognize pulled the wagon as they went out of the yard, the crowd following behind, going up through the pasture to the family graveyard. There was a pine box already in the grave and a few sparse clusters of flowers. When the coffin was lowered, the preacher prayed again, his voice soft and fervent, and then Matthew took the shovel and dropped the first load of red clods into the grave. Then he turned to leave the real labour of burial to other men. He was approached by a man who asked if he wanted the grave tramped. "It doesn't matter," he said. "Either way."

"If it's tramped, it won't settle so bad," the man said. "But some people just don't like having graves tramped."

"Do it, then," Matthew said, and the man left him alone.

Matthew went to the preacher and thanked him as the crowd drifted away. Then Matthew turned to Knox. "You'll stay," he said.

Knox looked at him. His voice was startled, but firm. "I'll stay tonight. But I've got to be back at work tomorrow."

Matthew had meant only for the night. But at the firmness in Knox's voice he turned his face away. He would be glad for the night work to be done now, the feeding and the milking, caring for the calves and the pigs and the chickens—all the things that went on in their own unchanging necessity and rhythm. He only wished that Jesse John had been able to come home.

VISTA: *Report*

Chickasaw Dam

July 16, 1937

Charles C. Connaway
Chief Construction Engineer
Tennessee Valley Authority

As of above date, construction of Chickasaw Dam is satisfactory, within a reasonable range of the projected construction schedule. Through the use of temporary gates, the first lockage through the completed lock took place on May 24, 1937. Construction of the permanent

upper mitre sill will be accomplished in December 1937, thus formally opening the lock to navigation.

Stage 2 construction, 15 bays spillway, is completed.

Stage 3 construction, 3 bays spillway, training wall, and power-house, is under way. Concrete is now being poured for the spillways and training wall. South embankment work, as you know, has encountered considerable difficulties that have not yet been overcome. The foundation is still being prepared and grouted.

Land acquisition, family removal, and cemetery relocation are proceeding on schedule.

Reservoir clearing has encountered some delay due to a temporary labour shortage during the crop season but extra crews are now in the field.

Depending upon (1) the successful completion of the south embankment by December of this year, (2) a maintained schedule of reservoir clearance, and (3) absence of unanticipated difficulties in family removals, it is believed that Chickasaw Dam can be closed for reservoir filling no later than April 1938.

Ross Newlin, Supervising Construction Superintendent

Earle B. Ragsdale, Project Engineer

Leslie R. Ackerman, Construction Engineer

Chapter 9

HERE WAS a great deal to be done and now Matthew had to do it alone. For the time being, he did not tell anyone about his plan: he didn't have time to begin on it now, for the crops were in the urgent stage of cultivation. But several times he walked to the head of the cove, looking at the narrow neck of the entrance, seeing how the hills came down close on both sides. He was sure it could be done, and the certainty of success comforted him.

Matthew couldn't get used to not looking up to see Rice coming across the fields to his work, lean, loose-jointed, still coltish though he was over eighteen. Each time the feeling swelled it died inevitably

and sickeningly, with the fresh realization of death and deprivation.

He was grateful for the work. Through these fast growing weeks a crop was made or lost; and he buckled into the work of ploughing and hoeing, of running the cultivator up and down the rows endlessly to uproot the grass and give the corn, cotton and sorghum a fair chance at the sunlight and moisture. For a while, he hired one of his brother John's boys to work, but after a few days he let him go again, for he had to be told everything to do. And, meanwhile, daily he lived in the hope of Jesse John's return. He did not expect Connie to come with him; he knew she would refuse. When Jesse John had had to face the hardness of refusal, he would be worthy of the cove.

During this time of readjustment, Matthew was annoyed by the constant coming of strangers. The first was a young man who wanted to get down the details of the accident on a very long and complicated government form. Then a lawyer came, a very young man who explained carefully that Matthew didn't have a leg to stand on in court, that Rice's death was due entirely to his own negligence.

Matthew just didn't want to talk about it. But the young lawyer came, and talked, and came again, and finally Matthew told him bluntly that he wanted nothing from the T.V.A. for his son's death. The young lawyer brought a paper and watched incredulous while Matthew signed it, and after that they left him alone.

It was a week before Arlis heard Crawford's horn again. The night it came she hurried out to him to stop the sacrilegious blast.

He saw her coming through the dusk and opened the car door.

"What do you want?" she said.

He smiled. "I wanted you to come down here," he said cheerfully.

She understood, then, that he did not know. "Rice is dead," she said, her voice struggling with the words. "We buried him last week."

Crawford was shocked. "I didn't know. I was sent up to Knoxville." He got out of the car. "And you needed me here," he said.

He put out his arms and held her close. She cried then, her body limp against him. She had needed him so that she could cry it all out completely. He stood holding her for a long time. Then they sat side by side in the car while she told him the whole story, and it was like the time

before the arguments about marriage had begun between them, tender and good.

But underneath, Crawford felt a growing depression. He was no nearer to prevailing over Matthew than he had been the first day. Matthew was impervious to assault and pressure except by the law. And Crawford was not the one to call the law in against him. When he left Arlis he drove home slowly, thinking. The next morning he went to the office. Sitting at his desk jammed in with several other desks, he watched the door, waiting for the boss to appear. When the boss entered, Crawford went to him. "I want to quit," he said.

Mr. Hansen pushed his morning work aside and leaned back in his chair. "Why?" he said.

Crawford shook his head. "I just want to turn in my resignation."

Mr. Hansen moved his head to indicate a chair, and Crawford sat down. The boss regarded him. "You're one of the best men in this division, Crawford," he said. "And I thought you were happy. Fact is, I was thinking about recommending you for head of the section on your next job. If you'd asked me who would be the last man to quit on me, I'd have said it was you. I don't understand it."

Crawford looked down at his hands. "I've been piling up trouble," he said slowly. "I think I'd better get out now and let somebody try who might have a chance to straighten it out before it's too late."

"Dunbar?" the boss said.

"He won't sell," Crawford said. "Now I've antagonized him to where he hates even to speak to me." He took a deep breath. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Hansen, I got too involved. I took to going out with his daughter—and I fell in love with her."

Mr. Hansen smiled. "That *is* beyond the call of duty. But it looks like that would have——"

Crawford smiled too, a smile that twisted on his lips. "Yeah. But the old man doesn't like it. He forbade us to see each other at the cove."

The boss shook his head wearily. "So you're going to quit."

"Yes sir," Crawford said steadily. "Maybe somebody else . . ."

"What kind of man is this Dunbar?" Mr. Hansen said.

"He's a fine man." Crawford fumbled for the words. "But he's set in

his ways—and that cove isn't land to him, it's the place that's been Dunbar for generations. He can't see anything else." Crawford struggled to straighten his thinking. "You knew his boy was killed a week or two ago. Got blown up by dynamite."

Mr. Hansen nodded soberly. "I heard about that," he said. "That won't help any, either."

"Matthew is fair-minded," Crawford said confidently. He shook his head again. "But he's a strange man, Mr. Hansen. I think he likes me. That's why he won't talk to me any more."

"And you?" Hansen said shrewdly. "You kinda like him, too."

"He's a fine man. Just about the finest I know."

"What are you planning to do after you quit?"

Crawford looked down at his hands again. "I don't know."

Mr. Hansen stood up. "I thought so. You can't think of anything else to do but quit. And then you'll go on off and find yourself a stinking little job somewhere and regret it the rest of your days. But the situation's not as drastic as you make it sound. We can always condemn the property, take it by force."

"It'd kill him. He deserves better than that."

Mr. Hansen leaned towards Crawford. "Then give him his deserving," he said rapidly. "Keep on working on him. Convince him. That's what you want, isn't it? Not just to take his land, but to show him the rightness of it."

"Yes," Crawford said. "To give him something as great as the cove is. Not just money, but a real and true belief to replace the one we're taking away from him."

"All right," the boss said. "Listen to me. You're the only man who can do it. You understand his feelings, know how he thinks." Hansen walked round his desk. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said. "There's a time beyond which we can't go, for they're going to close that dam next spring; but I'll give you every day that it's possible to give you." He paused. "If you *won't* try your dead-level best—I'll start condemnation proceedings against him tomorrow."

Crawford sprang up from his chair. "No!" he said. "You can't do that." He stopped, but seeing that the boss was grinning he grinned

himself, abashed. "All right. You win. I've got to keep on trying."

"Find a place for him to move to," the boss said. "Convince him it's better than his own. You can find something for him."

Crawford turned to go, still bewildered about where his resignation had gone. But a fresh love of his work rushed into him.

"And listen," the boss called after him. "You court that girl in your own time. You can't blame that on the T.V.A.!"

Crawford went back to his desk and sat a long time, not touching his paper work. At last he went downstairs and drove out to the cove. The sun was burning hot, and even in the moving car he was sweating. He parked the car at the head of the cove and started walking towards the house, hoping to catch Matthew at dinner.

"Howdy, Crawford," Matthew said.

Crawford whirled, seeing Matthew standing under a tree up on the close slope of the hill. "I heard about Rice," Crawford said when he reached him. "But too late to come to the burying."

"Yes," Matthew said. "I finally realized you didn't hear."

"It's a hard thing to bear," Crawford said inadequately.

"I've got to bear it. A man can do what's necessary, Crawford."

Crawford sat down on the ground, putting his back against a sapling. Matthew sat down with him. "You need somebody to help with that crop, all right," Crawford said.

"Jesse John will be back before long. I look for him before gathering time, as a matter of fact. He's a good worker."

Crawford hoped it was true. Matthew needed Jesse John now, as he had never needed anyone before. "Matthew," he said. "Next spring that dam will be closed." Matthew's head snapped round and Crawford held up his hand. "Listen to me. I'm going to find you a piece of land that's better than here. And I want you to promise me to come and look at it. If you don't like it, I'll find another one. There's bound to be one farm that you'll like well enough so you'll give up this senseless hanging on against the T.V.A."

Matthew stared at the cove. Far off in the fields there was a heat shimmer over the hard-packed road and a dust devil swirled, tossing dry corn and cotton leaves high in the air. In half an hour he would be

out there alone in the middle of it again, sweating as hard as the mules sweated, digging his crop out of the grass.

"There's just one thing wrong with that," he said. "Any other land you'll find has borne the names of other men. Only this land is Dunbar." He laughed. "So you just wear yourself out looking, son. I'll go with you when you say the word, and I'll look at it. But I'll tell you here and now, you'll never take me away from my own."

Matthew wasn't afraid of Crawford any more. With his new plan, there was no need to fear either Crawford, or the T.V.A. He looked at Crawford now with understanding and affection almost as though he were his son, involved in some childish misendeavour.

Crawford was startled; he knew a change had taken place and he was bewildered. Matthew leaned and clapped him on the knee. "Yes sir, I'll do anything you say." He smiled at Crawford, feeling the old comradesly relationship. "In fact, I don't see any reason why you should court Arlis down there in the car. Come on and sit up in the porch like respectable folks."

Crawford studied Matthew. "I'm glad to see you've decided the right way," he ventured. "We'll find that land together, and next winter you can move in plenty of time to get the new place ready."

"Move!" Matthew said. He stood up, sweeping an arm to point at the head of the cove. "You see that narrow neck of land, where the hills come down so close? Come harvest time, I'll take a team of mules and hook 'em to a scraper. I'll lay me a high earth dam all across the mouth of that cove. Who's talking about moving?"

Crawford, astonished, stood up, looking where Matthew was pointing. "You don't mean it," he said. "You're joking."

Matthew whirled on him. "I'll tell you I mean it," he said. "I'm gonna build that earth dam high and tight and when the T.V.A. water starts rising, I'll sit snug behind my own dam and laugh at all of you."

Crawford could not answer. He stared at the head of the cove. It was narrow enough, all right. With time, you could move enough earth across the mouth of that cove to close it up, like putting a cork into a bottle. But how long would an earth dam last? Matthew wouldn't ever think about that. And he would build it.

Matthew laid a hand on his shoulder "Come on to supper tonight, son," he said affectionately. "You're welcome in the cove any time."

But Crawford was staring round at the cove. "You can build your earth dam, all right," he said "But what are you going to do about the creek? If you dam it up, you'll flood yourself out. And if you don't—your dam won't do one single bit of good." He turned and walked away quickly, leaving Matthew dumbfounded. He had thrown him off balance; he had had to grasp the opportunity to restore the pressure.

Matthew saw it, all right. He couldn't help but see it. In his excitement and relief, he had overlooked the problem of the creek, ignoring it as though it were not there.

"I'll still do it," he hollered after him. "I'll make it work. I'll cost you your job yet." Crawford had reached the road and was walking towards his car, without looking back. "Arlis will expect you for supper," Matthew called after him, trying desperately to re-attain the openness and the courage he had found. "You hear?"

Crawford turned, and waved, and walked on. Matthew watched him get into the car and then he went heavy-footed up the dusty road towards the house. It had been a small victory, short-lived as a butterfly, and defeat was bitter in his mouth again.

MATTHEW finished the harvesting as best he could and still Jesse John had not returned. But he had pinned his hopes more on gathering time, the good time, when the cotton burst out in ripeness, when coons and possums fattened in the thickets along the river. That was when Jesse John would come home.

As well as the hurry and the work, Matthew thought about the problem of the creek. Crawford had shaken him on that. Still he was convinced that the earth dam was the only way to save the cove. He *wanted* it to be, it was a personal thing he could do in sweat and labour. But the creek flowed outward to the river, a breach in his defences. In his mind over and over again he traced the creek from the mouth back up to its beginning in the hills far beyond his own place, until he had a mental image of it as real and plain as the aerial map Crawford had once shown him.

Finally he had finished the harvesting. He was not happy with it, as he usually was, for he didn't really finish so much as quit. His crops were grassy, as they had never been, and his soul was not satisfied to leave growing grass standing in his fields. But he had done the best he could; there was nothing more to be done.

He had come to accept many things; at night he lay in bed half asleep, and listened to the soft murmur of voices from the front porch where Crawford sat with Arlis. Every night it went on, the soft murmuring, and long silences that were more disturbing than the talk. But he endured it. To forbid, now, after his inviting Crawford, would be an admission of weakness. And he trusted Arlis; if she had been going to leave him she would have done it long ago. He did not know that the burden of renunciation was made heavier on Arlis by his tolerance. Each night through that summer she felt her resolution weaken in this dangerous closeness.

Twice Matthew, in the middle of the harvesting, left his plough and started walking up the creek bank. But he had too much work on hand, and each time he turned back. The day after he had finished, though, he set out early in the morning determined to search out a solution in the twists and turns of the channelled water, to see if there was one little bend or curve he could not remember. And he found it. Far back up the slope, where the creek was very narrow, he found a place to suit his purpose. It was almost off his land, and he could not remember ever being here before. The creek bank was high on one side, but the other side was low and there was a flood channel, a shallow erosion deepening into a gully, carpeted with pine needles, where excess high water spilt over in times of steady rain.

He explored down the gully, afraid that it would open into the cove instead of the river. But it did not; the first low roll of ridge bordering the cove ran up high enough to prevent it. A creek could flow here, making a new way to the river, and he would be rid of it.

He went back to the creek, marvelling at the chance structure of the earth that gave the water a choice of ways to the river, wondering why it had chosen the cove when actually that was the more tortuous path. He did not know that David Dunbar, when he had discovered the cove,

had turned the creek at exactly this point and that the gully he had found was the original route, the cove channel the latter-day idea of man. David Dunbar had done the work in a day's hard labour with a shovel, cutting out a high bank that turned the creek away. But now the creek was fast here, too fast, and Matthew would have to lay a dam to turn it. Without stopping he went on to the barn where he hitched up the mules to the wagon and got the axe, the shovel and a pick out of the tool-shed. Then he wrestled the scraper into the wagon.

By the end of the day Matthew found he had worked through dinner without even thinking about it in his haste to make a beginning. Before he left, reluctantly, he stood by the creek looking at the evidences of his labour. There were two new and axe-jagged stumps low on the ground, a pile of brush from the tree-tops that could be thrown into the dam later, and in the creek two logs bobbing and threading against firmly driven upright piles. It was an infinitely small block upon the flow of the creek. But it was a start, a symbol of resistance against the fate that had been encroaching upon him. Matthew was satisfied. He slept well that night.

It took Matthew almost until gathering-time to finish the creek dam alone. Every morning he was at work by sun-up, and he did not quit until almost dark. Day after day he piled logs and brush against the row of stakes. When he saw them leaning away downstream he laboriously doubled the strength of the piling, standing waist-deep in water to drive the piles solidly into the bed of the creek. After the logs and the brush were in he began hauling earth, hour after hour in the hot blaze of the sun fighting the scraper into the ground to peel off a layer of hard-won soil.

Then, the scraper loaded, he would guide the team along the worn path to the creek bank to dump the load with a vast heave of his legs and shoulders, later having to pitch it shovelful by shovelful out towards the middle. A lot of the earth swirled away through the lacing of logs and brush but enough of it stayed to make a tiny perceptible progress with each ten or twelve hours of labour a day. Little by little the water began to back up from the dam, and as August wore on the water level dropped in the creek below his dam, leaving mud drying in the sun

And behind the dam the water piled up, inch by hard-fought inch, as he built the dam higher and higher.

At last a trickle of water threaded through a heel-print on the side towards the gully, drying quickly into the dry earth. Matthew stopped with his scoop load, watching it. The water sent another trickle after the first, then a heavier regiment to explore the new outlet.

Matthew stepped away from the slip and knelt over the tiny, borning creek he had made, watching with caught breath as the earth moistened inch by inch ahead of the flow. He wanted to hurry it, splashing with his hand, but he felt that would be cheating and he did not move as it trickled and ran and swirled pine needles into small stoppages, then conquered the stoppages to advance into new territory. The flow was broadening out of the creek now and a new finger came up behind Matthew, wetting the seat of his breeches where he squatted on the ground. Then the first flow of water found a fast drop down into the gully and it began to move, swirling and muddy. Matthew ran for his shovel and began ditching furiously along the trickle of water, the water surging in behind his shovel. When he stopped, panting, the water surged through the trench to the steep fall-off, gathering momentum.

He dropped the shovel and ran down the gully to the first head of water, trotting to keep up as it swept in a swift strike of power for the river. He watched while the water carried leaves and pine needles with it, running and twisting and turning along the very lowest level of the gully. He kept up with it for a while and then turned back, walking up the new creek he had made, knowing there was still a lot of work to do. But he knew that he had won. And he had learned a lot about building a dam, though this was a tiny endeavour compared to damming the mouth of the cove. He could not possibly do that alone. He would have to have help, a lot of help. But he was more determined than ever now. He was going to win all the way.

He went home and stabled the mules. Then he went on to the old channel of the creek. The bed was muddy, and he could see fresh animal tracks crossing where the water had been before. Fish were crowded into a few pools, and some had already died. He went on down towards the river, to see where the big dam would have to go. It wouldn't be

too bad. The water here was backwater. currentless, and it would be easy to dam without the pressure of the creek behind it. *Soon* now he would have to stop to gather the crop. But he could use the time beforehand in rounding up the help he would need, hands and mules and scrapers to pile the earth from shoulder to shoulder of the ridge.

At last, in the dusk, he went home to supper, tired and happy and spent with his success. Headlights swept into the cove and he stopped, seeing it was Crawford's car. Matthew smiled. Crawford was coming early tonight. Matthew stepped out into the yellow beam of headlight, lifting his hand, and Crawford stopped, leaning out.

"Evening, Matthew," he said.

"Howdy. Crawford come-a-courting." Matthew laughed. "Come here. I want to show you something."

Crawford got out of the car and they went together to the edge of the old swimming hole. Crawford studied it in surprise, and then turned to Matthew. "Why, what happened, Matthew?" he said.

"I turned that creek into a new channel back up yonder so it doesn't flow through the cove at all," Matthew said triumphantly.

Crawford sat down on the stump where the diving board was fixed, glad that Matthew could not see his face in the darkness. "There just ain't no way to stop you," he said. "No way in this world."

"No," Matthew said, his voice agreeing.

"I've been scouring this countryside," Crawford said, "looking for a place for you to buy. I turned down places any man would be proud to own, because I know the way of your thinking. But I finally found one to suit you. I was going to take you to see it tomorrow."

"I'll go," Matthew said. "I promised."

Crawford lit a cigarette. "It's a good place," he said. "Good black earth, well watered, and even bigger than Dunbar's Cove. There's electricity in the house and the nearest neighbour is half a mile away."

"All built up and cultivated," Matthew said. "With the weight of another man's name on it. Where is it?"

"It's called the Outlaw Old Place," Crawford said. He knew that already, in his mind, Matthew had rejected it.

"Sure, I know it. Pretty close to town, too. Why is Outlaw selling?"

"He wants to move into town," Crawford said.

Matthew shook his head. "Them Outlaws have lived on that land ever since I can remember. Well, you want me to go and look at it?"

"No," Crawford said, admitting defeat. He stood up, looking about him. "You'll never do it in time, Matthew," he said. "They'll be finished building Chickasaw next spring. You can't make a dam all by yourself in just one winter. You'll be working with frozen ground part of the time, and the days will get shorter." He shook his head. "You're setting yourself to the impossible."

"I'm not one man," Matthew said stiffly. "I've got sons and kinfolks. There are Dunbars you've never even heard of, Crawford, who'll come when I call."

THE FIRST one was Knox. Early the next morning Matthew cranked up the T-model and started down-river towards the dam. Only now, with the great overriding consideration of salvation at stake, could he at last call on Knox.

The old T-model ran well in the heat and the wind felt good on his face, whipping round the sides of the straight-up windscreen. Near the dam, he found the turn-off easily, a gravelled road worn by heavy lorries, marked by a big sign that said CHICKASAW DAM. He drove more slowly then, the traffic thickening round him with cars and lorries, throwing up a pall of dust from the road. Finally he saw a sign, TIME OFFICE, and parked the car near it, along a line of whitewashed knee-high posts that marked off the area.

He got out, looking round. In the distance he could see the new greyish-white concrete of the lock and dam stretching across the river. Men were swarming like ants on the other bank, and the earth looked scarred and raw. Between him and the river-bank the mixing plant jutted up rudely, topped by a round tower fed by a long, slow rise of conveyor. The mixer was surrounded by a haze of dust as the gravel rattled and thundered inside it. Matthew was beginning to have a headache from the hurry and the noise. He went quickly into the Time Office and stopped before the high counter. "I'm looking for my boy Knox," he told the girl. "Knox Dunbar. Where can I find him?"

She looked up, disinterested. "You'll have to wait until the shift is over," she said. "Go over to the dormitory area and find out where he lives. You can wait for him there."

Matthew stood patiently. "I want to see him now," he said.

"Is it an emergency?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"You can't enter the work area," she said primly. She went to talk to a man at the back of the office. The man came to the counter.

"Can you tell me what kind of work he's doing?" he said.

"I reckon he's over yonder with that gang of men," Matthew said. "If you'll just allow me to go over there . . ."

He saw the man and the girl look at each other, trying not to smile. Then the girl opened a file drawer and began flipping through the cards. She pulled one, glanced at it and gave it to the man. "He's a bulldozer operator," she said.

"I'll send for him," the man said. "Why don't you go up in the observation tower and take a look at the work while you're waiting? I'll send him there."

"I'd be proud to do that," Matthew said.

It was hot in the glassed-in observation tower. Matthew stared out over the dam to the distant creep and throb of men and machines on the other side of the river. So this was Chickasaw. This was where Knox liked to be, in the middle of all the hurry and noise and confusion. He watched the mixing plant disgorge a load of concrete on to the conveyor. Just below, two men stood with a wide blue paper folded out between them, jabbing at it with pencils, arguing. A dump lorry pulled down the road in a roar of power and dust and another load of gravel came to the top of the mixer and poured down into its innards with teeth-rattling thunder.

Matthew shook his head. They wouldn't ever finish this job by next spring. There was so much rawness and incompleteness in it, and nobody seemed to know what they were doing. *Running about like a chicken with its head cut off*, he thought. But still—it was impressive. The dam, though low, looked massive and strong and the lock building stood up clean and neat alongside the bank. While he watched, a barge

entered from below and the lock began filling, lifting the barge inch by inch to the level of the river above the dam.

Matthew heard a step on the steel ladder and Knox came through the doorway. He wiped his sleeve over his perspiring forehead. "Papa," he said. "What's the matter?"

"Why, nothing's the matter, son," Matthew said. "I just had to tell them it was an emergency to get them to find you."

Knox blew out his breath in relief. "I was scared to death," he said.

"I'm sorry," Matthew said. "I didn't think. Knox, I want you to come home with me."

Knox stood very still. Then he walked to the window and looked out over the dam. "I've never been up here," he said. He turned to Matthew. "Papa, you know I don't want to come home. This is my job, here." His shirt was dirty and sweaty. There was a white line on his forehead from the safety helmet he now held in his hand.

"I need you, Knox. I'm building my own dam, son. I'm throwing an earth dam across the mouth of that cove to keep the water out."

Knox did not look at him. "You're crazy, Papa," he said flatly. "Crazy to even think of such a thing."

Matthew lifted his voice. "Crazy or not, I'm going to do it."

Knox turned and looked at him then. "Look, Papa," he said, gesturing towards the activity below. "Just look at it. Do you think you can beat it?"

"I don't have to beat it. All I've got to do is fence myself away from it. If my land won't be flooded by their water, they can't make me sell it. Where do you go to turn in your time? I want to get started right away, before gathering-time."

Knox did not move. "I'm not going, Papa."

Matthew was already walking towards the stairway. He was surprised at the words. He felt his face flush, felt the blood begin to throb in his temples. Knox did not know what it had cost him to come asking, when he had let Knox go in the first place with scarcely a word to deter him. He walked back to Knox and stood close, looking into his face. "Are you my son?" he said.

Knox turned back to the glass, looking out so that he would not have

to see Matthew's eyes. "You see out there?" he said. "That's mine, Papa. My work. I'm a dam-builder. I've made it my work, just like the cove is yours. That's why I can't go back."

"I'll give you a chance to build a dam. Our own dam," Matthew argued. "You'll be finished here pretty soon. What are you going to do then? You'll have to come back to the cove next year anyway."

"In about a month, I'm being moved to either Pickwick or Chickamauga." Knox moved his head to look again at Matthew. "Papa, there are always big dams going up somewhere. They'll be putting them on the Missouri before long, and then rivers out on the West Coast, and the Ohio and the Kentucky. That's a lot of dams, a lot of work and money. It's my life, Papa!"

"Then you're no rightful son of mine!"

The words were loud in the hot little glassed-in room. Matthew was startled himself; he had not known they were going to burst out. He lifted his hand against Knox, the fist clenched, but he stopped himself in time. Knox's face was suddenly white. He raised both hands before him, open-palmed, to hold Matthew away. "Papa. Are you all right?"

Matthew could feel the blood swelling under his skin, puffing his face, and a swift stab of pain struck him along the left temple. Knox put his hands on his arm, but Matthew pushed him away. "I've come to beg you, Knox." He fought the words one by one out of his mouth. "I don't just want you home—I *need* you there."

"I can't help it, Papa," Knox said, embarrassed. "Jesse John will come home one of these days."

"I need both of you," Matthew said. He put out his hands to Knox. "I'm an old man, Knox. An old man needs his sons."

Knox wanted to capitulate, just to stop the words, the too-naked feeling, between them. But these were words and feelings that should not be used to win a contest and he felt anger against his father for stooping to use them. "Don't make me keep saying it. Don't keep on, Papa." He moved his hands. "I've already signed up for Chickamauga," he said. "I'm going to Pickwick first. Then they're talking about a big dam, the biggest of them all, up in North Carolina on the Little Tennessee."

Matthew still could not believe it. Implicit in the whole pattern of his

life was the belief that he could call on his sons in need, and be answered. "You're not going to help me, then?" he said slowly.

"Papa, you can't hope to build that dam."

"That's not for you to say." Matthew had to force the final words. "You won't come and help me do it."

They stared at each other across the empty space. "No," Knox said.

"I'm going now," Matthew said. His lips were stiff, shaping the words with difficulty. He started down the stairs. Each jar of movement was a white-hot pain in his head.

"I'll come to see you-all before I go off to that new job," Knox said.

"Don't bother," Matthew said. He went on down, his feet echoing on the steel rungs. Then he stopped at the foot of the tower and looked up at Knox following him down. "I don't want to see your face again, Knox," he said. "Don't ever set your foot in my cove again."

MATTHEW returned into the cove from Chickasaw Dam in a black anger. He went into the house and ate his dinner with a glowering look, searching Miss Hattie's and Arlis's faces for the strangeness he had found in Knox. After he ate he took the car again and drove the forty miles to John's place, his head still splitting. He stated his errand bluntly, expecting to be refused.

Of course, John told him, Matthew could have as many of the boys as he could spare. They would come tomorrow and stay until gathering time. He'd need all his hands then but they didn't have a thing to do now except a little firewood to stack against winter.

Somewhat mollified, Matthew drove home and, the next morning, he had four hands to work with him. They started clearing off the stretch where he intended building the earth dam, throwing the logs and the brush into the creek bed where the dam would cross. Matthew would have at least this much done by the time they had to quit for crop gathering. But much too quickly, John came one Sunday evening and said apologetically, "Matthew, I reckon I'm going to have to take my boys home with me now. We've got a big crop to gather."

Matthew looked at him, resentful of the passage of time. It was autumn, all right, and in his own fields the ears of Indian corn were



browning. "I reckon I can't ask you to let your crops stand in the field," he said. "I'll need them back as soon as you've finished, though."

John looked dubious. "Some of them have got to go to school."

"Send me what you can, and come yourself, John. That water's gonna pour in here next spring if we don't watch out."

John looked at the work. "Do you think you can finish it in time?"

Matthew whirled on him. "If you'll give me your help," he said. "One man can't do it."

"I'll send them," John said hastily. "And I'll come myself."

Matthew stalked away on hearing the words he wanted to hear. There was no time for talking now. He resented having to gather his own crop, almost wishing he had left his land barren this year. But with all his sweat and work, and the sweat and work of Rice, put into it, he couldn't let it spoil in the field. He'd try to hire some hands, even if cotton picking was seventy-five cents a hundred pounds.

For the first time for days, he thought about Jesse John. This was the time when he had hoped Jesse John would be home. He should have given up by now, or found Connie and been rebuffed. Well, he wouldn't depend on him any more, either. He went to the barn and got out the cotton sacks, examining them. Arlis would have to make him some new sacks this year; they had been doubled and redoubled on the bottom part that dragged on the ground so that they could not be patched any more. He told Arlis he was going to town to get material for new sacks.

In town, he made his purchases quickly, leaving word at the feed store that he wanted cotton pickers starting tomorrow. He put the heavy duck cloth on to the back seat of the car and started home again; he wanted Arlis to get at least two sacks made tonight, so that he and Miss Hattie could be in the fields tomorrow. She had never had to pick cotton before. But she would have to do it, this time.

Then as he drove off the square he remembered the post office. He parked the car, and walked round to check his box, remembering he hadn't been into town for a time, and the Autumn-and-Winter catalogue would probably be out by now. The box was jammed with the catalogue, and with fertilizer and seed advertisements, so that he had to wrestle with both hands to loosen the mass of printed material. He got

the mail out finally and walked, with both hands full, to the writing counter, laying the mass down and flipping through it hastily. His hands stopped suddenly, seeing the letter and knowing the handwriting though he had never received a letter from Jesse John before in his life. His fingers felt suddenly stiff and cumbersome as he opened the flap and took out the single sheet of paper.

Dear Papa—

I have been meaning to write for some time but have not been able to get round to it. I hope you are well. We are fine here, and I have a good job. I run up on Connie and everything is all right. That man Haskins just picked up and left her, and we have settled the trouble between us. She has come back to me and I am very glad that we have settled this old trouble. She is very well.

After talking it over, we have decided it would be best if we did not come back there, especially since I have a good job here at steady pay and Connie is going to have a baby. Yesterday I made a down payment on a caravan for us to live in as we will have to move from place to place on this work I am doing now. Well, I just wanted to let you know that everything is all right between I and Connie. She is happy that I came after her the way I did now. Ha Ha.

I hope you-all are well. Hug Miss Hattie and Arlis for me, and say Hello to Rice and Knox. Well, I have run out of paper, so will close.

Your son, Jesse John

Matthew read the letter once, hastily, and then he went over it again, more slowly, absorbing the intent of each sentence. He finished the second time and, staring at it, he was surprised to see a drop of water fall on the paper. He dashed at his eyes with one hand, looking round furtively to see if anyone had noticed. Blindly he gathered up the mail in both hands and went out into the bright sunshine, walking down the street towards his car. Someone spoke to him in a cheery voice but he did not answer. He got into the car and put the mail on the seat beside him. Then he picked up the letter and read it again.

He knew, then, that it was all gone. Knox and Jesse John, like Rice, would never come back to him and the cove again. He realized it fully, realizing at the same time that he had never let himself believe it before. He put his hand on his eyes to see if they were still wet. It did not

become a man to weep. But the loss of sons deserves a man's tears. For they were gone. By the word of his mouth Knox was forbidden the cove. Rice was dead. And Jesse John had followed the wisp of his desire to far places, to stay for ever.

Matthew sat in the car for over an hour. At last he leaned forward over the wheel to pull out the choke, got out and cranked the car and got back in, revving up. He drove slowly, but he could not keep his mind on the driving and the car wobbled over the road as though he were drunk. He turned into the cove in a wide blind sweep and the car chugged up to the house. He saw Crawford's car parked under the big oak and he did not get out, sitting there looking at it.

Crawford came out of the house and walked towards him, smiling. Matthew stared at him and then turned his face away. Crawford put his foot on the running-board and leaned in. "Arlis told me you'd gone to town to buy cotton sacking," he said. "Well, she can just make one for me, too."

Matthew turned his head. There was a stunned look on his face. "What do you mean?" he said.

Crawford lifted his hands. "I've got myself a two-week vacation," he said. "So I thought I'd come and help you gather your crop. You need some help, don't you?"

Matthew looked at Crawford, and then surveyed the cove, arc by arc of its circle. He looked back at Crawford. "Sure," he said. "I can use you. But I warn you. I'll work you to the bone. I'll work that T.V.A. fat off of you. So you'd better get a good night's rest tonight."

MATTHEW drove himself, and he drove Crawford, and yet that was a peaceful two weeks. They did not talk about the dam, nor about Arlis. The time was a hiatus in their struggle. Crawford was a good worker and he kept up with Matthew, stride for stride and row by row, and their voices were quiet as they spoke and laughed or fell silent for long working silences.

Crawford wore overalls and a sweat-stained shirt and he slept in Knox's old room. Matthew grinned grimly to himself at night when he heard Crawford leave Arlis early and go to bed. It had been a long

time since Crawford had laboured at muscle-labour like this. It was a good time. Matthew had almost forgotten what peace felt like. *This is the way it used to be always, he would tell himself and he could not believe it.*

During these weeks Crawford felt the teasing contentment of being at home at last, in a way he had never known home. Arlis stood in the back porch at dinner-time and called them to the meal and when they came up from the barn she smiled at him as he opened the screen door and came in to eat. It was tantalizingly like being married except that they lay in separate beds at night. Arlis had too much to do to help in the fields. But often Miss Hattie would pick with them, unable to keep up, trailing far behind with her cotton sack. Crawford laughed at Matthew with Miss Hattie; Matthew was determined to use her to hurry the work, but he could not be harsh with her. Just about every other day he would tell her to stay out of the field and rest up.

Crawford watched Matthew planning and preparing the next year's crop in the midst of gathering this one, unable to point out the uselessness of it. They carefully cut and stacked the corn-stalks so that the fields would be easy to plough next spring and Crawford knew that Matthew would do the cotton-stalks the same way. So much care, so much planning, and next year fish would swim in the furrows of the fields, in spite of all that Matthew could do.

At night Matthew would go in to see the old man and Crawford would hear the murmur of his voice for an hour at a time. When Matthew emerged he seemed to have taken great comfort and confidence, as though the old man could actually listen and advise. But the old man had now sunk into an almost complete non-communication. Day by day he withdrew his life nearer and nearer to the ultimate necessities of eating and breathing.

Matthew was doing the same thing, Crawford realized. To sustain the cove, he was cutting out the non-essentials, family and friendship, gentleness and kindness. And Crawford knew that ultimately he would withdraw from all human contact and reason, and die in his soul as surely as the old man was dying. It was wrong, unutterably wrong. Crawford lay awake at night, aching for Matthew—and for himself.

Chapter 10

AFTER CRAWFORD'S vacation, and during the winter, only the thought and the hope of Arlis kept him coming to the cove, otherwise he would long since have abandoned the whole wearing endeavour and told Hansen he had finished. He and Matthew talked about the T.V.A. sometimes, quietly, without anger. But no land Crawford could find pleased him, and nothing Crawford said could turn Matthew from his fanatical determination to finish the dam.

When March came, with Matthew's dam still rising, time was getting short, too short. Crawford could not wait longer. One day he reluctantly drove to the cove. He stopped the car outside the earth dam that reached now across the old road into the cove, and walked up on the piled earth. On his right there was a cluster of men and mules, scraping soil from a shoulder of the ridge. Down past him to the creek was a slide road. While he watched, a team swung past him, one of John's boys on the reins chirruping to the mules, going on to the creek bank where the boy dumped the earth. Crawford studied the useless effort, feeling the reluctance mount in him until he wanted to drive away without seeing either Matthew or Arlis. But he could not do this, and so he went down off the high pile of earth, looking for Matthew among the men. He had put the final steps off too long, already.

Matthew was wielding a shovel, the muscles in his broad, stooped back flexing and tensing. Crawford had watched him labour all winter in this way, but the sight still hurt him. He walked nearer. "Come to help out?" Matthew said, smiling grimly, using the wry words with which he always greeted Crawford now.

Crawford looked into his lean, gaunt face. The bones were prominent from the long concentration and labour and his eyes were shelved under the brows. His hands were gaunt too, as though wasted by illness. Crawford shook his head. "I'd like to talk to you."

Matthew looked round. "I ain't got no time to talk," he said. "Go on up to the house. Arlis is probably waiting on you."

Matthew turned away. He had no interest in anything now except

the dam, the amount of earth he could move in one day, and how many men and boys he could coerce into working for him. He stamped the shovel into the ground and lifted it. One more shovelful. He stamped again, heaved, counted the constant tally in his mind. One more shovelful. Then he paused momentarily to see jealously if the others were keeping up with his pace.

After the crop had been gathered, he had sorted among the kinfolk, seeking shamelessly for help. He reminded them with remorseless intent of the favours he had done them, of the times of sickness and death when he had come to work out their crops, how he had taken some of them into the cove for a month or a year when trouble struck them down. He had flayed them with the thought of Dunbar's Cove covered with water, the old family homestead gone for ever. And they listened, for to all of them Dunbar's Cove was the special Home Place. It was the old primordial clan-calling, an owed allegiance. So they came as they would have come in sickness or in death, some days as many as twenty, some days only one or two, and Matthew drove them mercilessly, his voice like a whip, and worked as hard as any three of them himself. So, slowly and surely the dam was being built.

And yet it grew too slowly. At night Matthew woke feverish, thinking about the earth yet to be moved. It was the creek bed that baffled him, worried him, worked him into the utter end of exhaustion. It swallowed the earth like an endless maw, the earth melting down as it was dumped into the quiet river backwater.

He finished loading the slide. Turning round, looking for the next task, he saw Crawford still waiting. "I told you I don't have time to talk," he said. "Go and talk to Arlis."

"It's you I came to see," Crawford said.

Matthew kept on walking. He could hear Crawford following and at last he whirled. "All right. Say it and get on out of my way."

"Why don't you set down and rest a minute?" Crawford said gently. "You need it, Matthew."

Matthew glared at him, his eyes red and dry. "I can rest when I get this dam finished. Then I can rest all my life if I want to."

"Matthew," Crawford said, "you've got to put an end to it. It won't

work." He paused, taking a deep breath. "I've told them to condemn your land. I've set the law to work on you."

The blood surged into Matthew's face. He took a step towards Crawford. "You set the law on me?" he said. "You would do that?"

"I tried to warn you. But you wouldn't listen. They will condemn this land now, pay you a fair price for it, and take it from you."

A cunning look came into Matthew's eyes. "How can they condemn land that won't be covered by their reservoir waters? The law says only land that will be flooded. The cove won't be flooded—not after I get that dam built."

"But their maps and their studies show this land is necessary," Crawford said, holding his voice to reasonableness. "That's the law."

"Then they'll just have to change their maps and their studies. They didn't reckon on me building a dam, that's all." Matthew glared. "So call your law. See what your law can do."

"They're coming," Crawford said heavily. "You'll be served with the papers any time now. So you may just as well let these men go back home and do their own useful work."

"No," Matthew said.

Crawford moved closer to him. Looking into his face, he was afraid. *He was a gentle man*, he thought. "Matthew," he said, "they're all gone now. All up and down the river they've moved out, the houses are torn down and the land is cleared. You're all alone now."

Matthew turned triumphantly towards the labouring men. "Looka yonder," he said. "Them's Dunbars. Do I look like I'm alone?"

"Yes," Crawford said softly. "You're alone, Matthew. Those men will melt away when the law comes down on you."

Matthew jerked his gaze back to Crawford. "It's coming now?"

Crawford nodded. Matthew's mouth moved, mumbling words to himself, and he put one hand on his bearded chin, rubbing it hard against the bristles. "Come here, Crawford," he said, mildly now. "I reckon the time has come to show you."

He turned and led Crawford towards the house, then up in to the porch and into the passageway. Beckoning, Matthew opened the door into his own bedroom. Crawford followed him, wondering. Matthew

went to the bed and shoved it forcefully half-way across the floor.

Crawford gasped. He stared uncomprehending, unbelieving, down at the floorboards that had been hidden by the bed. There were guns; Matthew had collected shotguns, and rifles, with boxes of shells and cartridges borrowed from other Dunbars up and down the coves.

With an effort, Crawford lifted his eyes to look at Matthew. "You can't mean it," he breathed.

Matthew nodded. "I mean it," he said. "If your law comes here, this is what I'll meet it with." He kept his eyes steadily on Crawford. "When you start pushing a man, you've got to calculate on it coming to this. You thought I didn't have any choice but to hire me a lawyer, knowing I wouldn't have a chance in your court. But I'm gonna fight this thing to the end, Crawford, on the grounds that *I* choose."

Crawford had thought he knew him, though he realized that violence lay only lightly beneath the surface in these men. He had seen the men working at his father's sawmill fight to kill at the sound of a word, with knives or long scantlings of pine clutched in their hands. But still he had not anticipated the guns.

"You can serve your papers," Matthew was saying. "But they can't take this land with paper. I aim to hold my cove against all comers, the way old David Dunbar would have done it himself."

Crawford did not want to see the guns again. Moving blindly, he stumbled out of the room, stopped in the passageway and leaned against the wall, feeling the shaking inside. So this violence, this fanaticism, had been latent in Matthew all the while under the gentle surface, until his loss and desperation had pushed him too far.

Matthew came out of the bedroom and went past him without speaking, going back to the men and the work. Crawford straightened himself and went into the kitchen. He wanted Arlis, but the kitchen was empty except for Miss Hattie. "Where's Arlis?" he asked.

Miss Hattie nodded towards the living-room. "In there."

Crawford opened the door into the living-room. Arlis was bathing the old man; Matthew no longer had time. She smiled. "I'll be finished in a minute. Go on in the kitchen and pour yourself a cup of coffee."

Crawford sat down at the kitchen table, and Miss Hattie put a cup of

coffee before him. He looked up to see her regarding him critically. "I sure hope I don't have as many ups and downs as you and Arlis," she observed. "I don't think I could stand it."

Crawford looked at her. She was a woman now, tall, slender but rounded. And she was subdued, quiet, restrained by the knowledge of her womanliness. "Who's *your* fellow?" he asked.

She tossed her head. "Don't have none. Don't want none. I wouldn't go through that for all the . . ."

"Not this week. But next week. Next week, for sure."

She blushed. "I think about it," she confessed, "all the time. How come you just start thinking like that?"

"I don't know," he said gravely. "It just happens."

She was angry. "No!" she said. "Not me! I don't see that it's made you and Arlis very happy."

He felt the heaviness come into him again. "Sometimes it doesn't," he said. "That's the chance you've got to take."

She stood up. "I wouldn't get into something like that for all the tea in China." She left the room, her skirt swinging.

Crawford felt better now, but he knew there could be no drawing back. He had deliberately lied to Matthew about the condemnation proceedings; until now he had not been able to bring himself to say the final words that would place matters in the strong, impersonal hands of the law. He had hoped against hope that in the face of this final threat Matthew would capitulate and so he would not have to bring in the law at all. And then he had seen the guns. When Arlis came into the room, she crossed quickly to his side. "What's the matter, Crawford?"

"He's got guns in yonder, Arlis." His voice was muffled. "Guns he's ready to use."

He felt her hand tighten on him. "I know," she said. "You can't hide anything from a woman that keeps the house."

"Then why didn't you tell me?" he demanded. He stared at her, wondering if she approved, if she . . .

She did not look at him. "I kept hoping it wouldn't travel this far," she said. "I was afraid, if you knew, you'd force him to it. I kept hoping . . ." Her voice stopped, running down into nothingness.

"You should have told me," he said bleakly.

She sat down next to him. "I did the best I could. But you can't stop him, Crawford. There's no way to stop him."

Crawford thought about it. It was inevitable now. "You're right," he said. "There's nothing we can do." Far in the distance he heard a lifted shout as one of the men urged a mule. "He's got this thing in his mind like a cancer. We can only save ourselves now. It's time for us to go."

"Us?" Arlis said, as though she did not understand him.

"You and me," he said violently. "We're leaving him now. We're going to save ourselves, at least."

She drew away from him. "You go," she said. "I have to stay."

He stood up, towering over her, taking her by the shoulders and shaking her. "Do you think he cares about you?" he shouted. "Do you think you mean anything to him except somebody to cook and clean and feed his slaves working out there on that dam?"

"I'm his daughter," she said. "I'm Arlis Dunbar."

"You *were* his daughter," he said harshly. "His sons are gone and you are gone, out of his mind and heart. Now there's only Matthew, and the cove, and the dam he's building. Don't you see that?"

"He hasn't spoken the word. He hasn't given me to you yet."

Crawford could not look at her any longer. There was too much stubborn, unconquerable Dunbar in her face. "He won't speak the word," he said. "This is another Matthew from the one I knew last year, from the papa who brought you up. This is a stranger."

Arlis turned her head away. "He may not be my father any longer," she said slowly. "But he still needs me. When I was fifteen I took a load on my shoulders, Crawford. I can't put it down yet."

So this was the ending, here, ignominiously, in the kitchen. They had gone as far as they could together. Crawford picked up his cap. "I'm going now," he said.

She watched him while he put on the cap and walked to the door. "Can't we hope?" she said. "Can't we even hope any more?"

He turned his head, thinking, *We'll quit here. But it's going to take a long time to kill it. A very long time.* "I don't think so," he said.

She waited, and he waited, too, but there was nothing more to say.

At last she looked away from him. "You won't come back?" she said.

"Yes," he said harshly. "I'll have to come back. I'll be serving Matthew with the condemnation notice."

"Oh," she said. Her voice was flat, rejected.

He would have to find the strength to leave. He tugged at the door as though it were solid concrete, and was surprised when it opened. He stepped through it, and, turning to close it behind him, he saw her head go down on the table, heard her first tearing sobs.

CRAWFORD did not stop at his desk; he went on through the big room directly to Mr. Hansen's office. "I've done everything I can," he said. "Start your condemnation proceedings."

Mr. Hansen studied his grim face. Wordless, he inclined his head towards a chair, one hand reaching for the phone. Crawford sat down, watching him dial the number, watching the wheels of force go inevitably, grindingly, into action. He looked down at his empty hands, thinking, *I failed*.

"Sam," Mr. Hansen said into the phone. "Hansen. Look, I've got a case for you. Matthew Dunbar. D-U-N-B-A-R. That's right." His eyes shifted to Crawford's face. "It's condemnation. How long will it take to file the Declaration of Taking?" He listened. "That's good. It's getting late, you know." He stopped again, listening. "Fine. Fine, Sam. See you." He hung up the phone, and picked up a paperweight, turning it in his hand. "I remember my first condemnation proceeding," he said. "Tore me all up. But they have to be done just the same."

"What happens now?" Crawford asked.

"Our legal staff files a Declaration of Taking. That transfers title to the United States Government, through the T.V.A. We deposit the fair price, and file notice on the other party. If he wants to protest the price, he goes before the Condemnation Commission. The Commission fixes the final price. And if he still doesn't like it, he can appeal it to the Federal District Court."

"It sounds easy, the way you tell it," Crawford said at last. "But listen—that man's got guns out there."

Mr. Hansen sat very still. "You're sure?"

Crawford nodded. "He's not going to pay any attention to your Declarations and Commissions. He's on his land and he aims to stay there."

"One of those!" Mr. Hansen's hand moved to the telephone, then he took it away. "We'll have to go through the motions, anyway," he said. "If he doesn't show up at the Commission hearing, we'll get the whole thing decided right there, as far as the price and the legal end is concerned. Then we can get an eviction notice from the Federal Court, and we'll have the U.S. Marshal's Office to back us up." He paused, thinking. "I want you to stay with him as much as possible, Crawford. Go out there with the lawyer when he takes the papers. You've got to keep him from using those guns."

Crawford spread his hands. "I can't do anything," he said.

"You've got to try. We've never had bloodshed before, and it's not going to start now if I can help it." Mr. Hansen leaned forward. "Crawford, this one little incident can ruin us, wreck the whole programme." He shook his head. "You know the enemies of the T.V.A. You know the coverage they could get, the pictures in the newspapers, the brave farmer with his trusty old shotgun standing off the cruel T.V.A." His voice stopped, running down. "I didn't even think of guns. It didn't even cross my mind."

"Or mine," Crawford said. He stopped, thinking how Matthew had changed from the man he had known. Then he stood up. "I'll do what I can."

Mr. Hansen relaxed. "I'll tell Sam," he said.

ARLIS HAD not slept until dawn. She had lain on the bed, stiff and straight. She had felt as death should feel. She did not even know that she had finally gone to sleep when grey dawn was washing at the window of the room. She woke quickly, as she always did; and when she turned her head towards the window, the shock of lateness swept into her. The sun was high in the sky, at least ten o'clock, and she could not ever remember having slept so late. With deep reluctance, she forced herself to get up, to face the travail of her empty day. She had denied Crawford by standing on her duty—and here she had been

sleeping it away. She dressed quickly, and went out into the passageway, feeling a heavy guilt about the breakfastless men.

She opened the kitchen door and stopped. Last night, in weariness, she had left the supper dishes to be washed this morning. But the table was cleared, the wash-pan was piled with dishes, there was a fire in the stove, and a pot of turnip greens bubbling on the back eye. Miss Hattie leaned over the dish-pan, her hands efficient with the soaping and the cleansing. While Arlis watched, she wiped her hands on the too-big apron and went to open the oven door, bending to add a stick of stove-wood to the fire. She straightened up, feeling a presence, and turned to look at Arlis. "Well!" she said. "So you finally decided to get up." She motioned towards the table. "Set down. I'll get you some breakfast." Her voice was brisk and friendly.

Arlis, staring at her, went to sit at the table. Miss Hattie lifted the heavy iron skillet from its nail and put it on the front eye of the stove. She sliced bacon with a deft knife and flipped it into the skillet. She tested the coffee-pot gingerly with her hand and brought Arlis a cup. "Here," she said. "Drink this while your breakfast is getting done."

"You cooked breakfast?" Arlis said unbelievably.

"Sure," Miss Hattie said. "You looked like you aimed to sleep all day. I cooked breakfast for everybody and cleaned up afterwards." She wrinkled her nose. "You sure left a mess from last night, Arlis Dunbar. And I tidied up the house, and I've got dinner on the fire."

Miss Hattie turned the bacon in the skillet, waited, took it out and put it on a piece of brown paper to drain. Then she broke two eggs into the skillet, looking towards Arlis as she did so. "I kept you some rolls warm, too," she said. "Want some 'lasses to go on them?"

Arlis shook her head. She waited, feeling strange in the house, while Miss Hattie finished the breakfast and placed it before her. The eggs were just right—not too soft, not too hard. "Where in the world did you learn to cook?" she said suspiciously.

Grinning, Miss Hattie sat down opposite her. "From you," she said. "Where else?"

"How could you learn how to cook when I ran you out of the kitchen every time you got underfoot?"



Miss Hattie laughed. "Well," she said. "I reckon us Dunbar women are just natural-born housekeepers."

Arlis put down her fork. She stared at Miss Hattie, seeing her no longer as a child. *She's almost fifteen*, she thought. *As old as I was when Mama . . .* She let the thinking hit her, coming into her with the force of a blow. *I only stayed because of my duty*, she thought. *That's all that was left, because Papa is a stranger.*

Arlis regarded her. "Miss Hattie, why did you get breakfast?"

"Well," Miss Hattie said seriously, "a woman's got to learn to cook and clean some time. You never gave me a chance, so I just took the first one that come handy. I've been wanting to try my hand."

"It's a different matter when you do it every day," Arlis said. "It's not so much fun then."

"Oh, I don't know," Miss Hattie said airily. "You did it when you were fifteen. I reckon I could, if I had it to do."

Arlis stared into Miss Hattie's face, searching for the child she had brought up. But Miss Hattie was no longer a child. She was tall, innocent, serious. There were momentary flightinesses in her, but she was not a child. "Miss Hattie," she said, her voice breaking over the words. "Do you—do you think you could take care of Papa?"

"Of course," Miss Hattie said boastfully. Then she registered the seriousness in Arlis. "You mean . . .?"

"What if I went off with Crawford?" Arlis said, holding her voice steady with an effort.

Miss Hattie studied her face. "You love that man, don't you? Sister, if you've just got to go with him, go on. Don't worry about this house or about me or Papa. You just follow what you've got to do."

Miss Hattie had not called her "Sister" since she had been a little girl, a very little girl who had just lost her mother. Arlis felt the weakness, the sudden sense of release, flood over into happy tears.

Miss Hattie was looking round the kitchen, the imminent pride of possession swelling in her. "Why," she said wonderingly to herself, "this will be *my* kitchen. *My* house." She said the words as if she could not believe them to be true.

ARLIS moved about the house, looking at the work that Miss Hattie had done, but she could not yet believe it. Finally, she went into her own room, intending to make the bed. But Miss Hattie had been before her, making the bed, sweeping the floor, tidying up.

Not knowing what to do, she sat on the bed, feeling useless. She thought of Matthew with the guns, and she felt a shiver of fear; for him, and for Crawford, and for all the men. But women have never been able to stop the men from fighting, she thought. Women's concerns were love, and children, and marriage.

She went down on her knees suddenly before the bed and reached under it, wrestling forth a large cedar chest. As though she had been

afraid, she had not looked into it since Crawford had come. She opened it now, reverently, as though opening a shrine.

Matthew had given her the cedar chest for a bottom drawer the Christmas she was ten years old. She remembered how disappointed she had been when she had torn the gay wrappings from the big, enigmatic package. Her ten-year-old mind had divined great wonders in such a huge Christmas box; but a bottom drawer had seemed so senseless, useless, in the tight little world of the ten-year-old.

But her mother had started filling it, that first winter, with a Bridal Ring quilt she sat up night after night to quilt for her, leaning over the spread frame in the yellow lamplight, her quick plump hands plying the needle. And by the time Arlis was thirteen, she was adding her own purchases and makings to the chest, so that now it was full.

She lifted the lid slowly and looked in. The faint whiff of rich cedar swept into her nostrils. She lifted out the filmy nightgown, her last purchase, and then the lingerie. She had stitched her name into each pair of panties with a blue thread. There were six of them, and she laid them aside in a neat pile on the bed. Then she took out the slips and the bras, giving them hardly a glance for she had not worked on them herself.

She was getting down into the heart of the chest now. There were two tablecloths she had embroidered herself with a fruit-basket design. There was a delicate extravagance of tablecloth made of white lace. There were white sheets with her name stitched into one corner, and carefully embroidered pillow-cases. And at the very bottom of the chest was the first gift, the Bridal Ring quilt. The colours were still bright and fresh though the quilt was more than ten years old by now, unused, new, waiting to be spread on her bridal bed. Looking at it, Arlis felt a tight lump in her throat.

Then her mood shifted suddenly. Even if she did go with Crawford, she couldn't take all this cherished accumulation with her. No. If she went, she would have to leave it behind. She could not hope to have all this, and Crawford too.

She began folding up the things and putting them away again. It did not matter. All that mattered was Crawford. She knew it now, in this moment of denying all the years of the bottom drawer. Love, she knew,

stands alone. Her mind was so clear now she wondered why she had hesitated for so long. She was individual, different, strong, as Matthew was individual; and so she could go away from him, she could leave his care in the young hands of Miss Hattie. She could, at last, relinquish her duty. Miss Hattie was only fourteen; but that was old enough.

Almost happily, she put everything back into the chest and started to shove it under the bed. Then she halted. She could take something, anyway. Just a few things, the nightgown and . . . She blushed to herself and hurried into her closet, hunting for the week-end bag that Knox had given her two Christmases ago. She had never used that, either, because she had never been anywhere.

She opened the bag and packed the nightgown and the lingerie in it. She took dresses from her closet, and utilitarian garments that she would surely need. Then she stood up, looking about her room. She shoved the chest under the bed, and hid the week-end bag next to it. Then, abruptly, she sat down on the bed. How did she know she could still go with him? How did she know the opportunity still existed? Sharp and clear in her mind was the stoniness of his last departure. Utterly devastated by the sudden realization, she put her head into her hands.

LATE IN THE morning, Crawford and the lawyer stopped their cars just outside the cove. "All set, Sam?" Crawford said.

Sam was a tall man, big and gangling, with an easy air about him. "Well," he said cheerfully, "he can't shoot us just for talking to him." He paused. "I hope *he* knows that."

"Better let me go first," Crawford said. "He knows me."

Sam laughed. "Is that a help?"

Crawford was forced to laugh, too. "I'm not sure," he confessed. He went back to his own car, got under the wheel, and pulled out round Sam's Studebaker. They went on down the road. From the moment Crawford turned into the cove he could see Matthew standing on top of the dam, watching. He was alone. He was holding a pistol in his hand.

Crawford stopped the car at the face of the dam and got out, and Sam came to his side, carrying a folder of papers.

"Howdy, Mr. Dunbar," Crawford said formally.

Matthew stood looking down at them. "Howdy, Crawford. What can I do for you?"

Crawford could not help looking at the gun. "This is Sam MacClendon," he said. "He's a T.V.A. lawyer."

Matthew hesitated. But there were only two men, one of them Crawford. Finally he put the gun away and said, "Come on up."

Without the gun, Matthew looked more like the man he knew. Crawford climbed the side of the dam, feeling his shoes sink into the loosely packed earth Sam came with him. When he reached the top he could see the cluster of men with shovels down on the inside face of the dam, looking up at them.

Sam ignored them. He opened the folder and extracted an envelope. "Mr. Dunbar," he said briskly, "here is your notice of the Declaration of Taking. You'll find all the information in there, including the price we're willing to pay. This will serve notice on you that this land is now legally vested in the ownership of the United States Government."

Matthew stepped away from the envelope, putting his hand inside the bib of his overalls. "I refuse to accept it," he said. "Get off my land."

"Matthew," Crawford said, "this is just a formality. You have the right to appeal. You can hire a lawyer, and get him to prepare your case."

Matthew eyed the white envelope as if it were a poisonous snake. "If I go before that Commission of yours, I admit that I'm willing to give up my land, so long as I get a fair price. Is that right?"

"Yes," Sam said. He looked at Crawford. Crawford did not move.

"You don't give me a chance," Matthew said softly. "By just consenting to that, I'd be giving up." He shook his head. "I think you'd better go now."

"If you don't appear, the proceeding will be summary," Sam said. "Title is vested in the government right this minute. Immediately after the hearing, the District Court will issue an eviction notice and you will be moved off the premises."

"Got it all cut and dried, haven't you?" Matthew said. He took the gun out of his overalls and motioned with it. "Get off my land. Now." His voice had changed; flattened, hardened.

Sam hesitated. Crawford looked at Matthew. "Go on, Sam," he said urgently. "Go on back to the car."

Sam proffered the envelope again. "I've got to give you this," he said. "Then my duty is done."

Matthew ignored him. Sam held the envelope for a moment, then dropped it to the ground at Matthew's feet and turned, starting down the face of the dam.

"Pick it up," Matthew said.

Crawford stood frozen while Sam turned and looked at Matthew.

"You're littering my premises. I said, pick it up."

He won't, Crawford thought swiftly. *He'll have to deny his manhood.* . . . He stooped and recovered the envelope, putting it into his own pocket.

"Go on now," Matthew said to Sam. "Get into your car and don't stop moving while you're still in sight."

Crawford nodded imperceptibly at Sam, and Sam went on to his car. They watched, silently, while he turned it and drove away towards town. Then Crawford looked at Matthew. "You can't win," he said quietly.

"Not your way. My way—maybe I can."

Crawford looked beyond him towards the cove and the house. He could see Arlis standing in the porch, watching them, and his inside lurched sickly. Then he saw her leave the porch. He forced his whole attention back to Matthew. He must find a new, a last way to say it. "Matthew," he said finally, "you've taken the fruit of your ancestors and spared it out in your own life without pruning new life into it. You haven't realized that without new strength it could not go on into the lives of your sons. Why do you think your sons left you? Because their future is bankrupt here, because you've given them only the past." He paused. "You didn't even leave them room for another dream, a new idea, a dairy farm, a"

He saw the change in Matthew's face, and he knew he had to stop. Matthew drew out the gun again, quickly, angrily. And Crawford was afraid. He had struck home to Matthew. He started to lunge for the gun, but he stopped; he knew he could not make it.

Matthew was shaking all over, as with a chill. His voice was choked. "Get out," he said. "Get out!"

Crawford turned away. He went down the side of the dam, his back crawling against the half-expected impact of a bullet. He did not dare look back. He got into the car, turned it, and stopped, looking up the face of the dam. "And your only answer to what I said is in your hand," he said. He drove away, leaving Matthew on his dam, holding the pistol in his shaking hand.

Once out of the cove, Crawford slowed his car, feeling himself trembling. He had brushed close to danger. But he had said it; he had spoken words that a man can hardly ever say to another, and he had watched them strike home. But he could not foresee their total effect.

He was driving almost without watching the road. Then, looking up, he stamped on the brakes, hard, swerving the car to the side of the road. Arlis was standing directly in front of him, a blue week-end suitcase in her hand, wearing a pretty dress he had not seen before.

He opened the car door and got out. "Arlis," he said.

"Can I go with you?" she said.

He stared at her. There was a movement in his face, unknown to him, and she dropped the suit-case, running to him. He grabbed her, tight, and she put her frantic, exploring hands on his face.

"Yes," she said. "Yes. Yes."

Chapter 11

HEY WERE driving down the road towards town, and the cove was behind them, and they were together. Crawford drove with one hand on the wheel, the other tightly clasping Arlis's hand. She shivered. "I didn't know whether you'd let me come or not. Up until the very last second, I didn't know."

Crawford stopped the car on the highway bridge to look at her, studying her face, the slant of her nose, the curve of her lips. She lifted his hand to her lips, pressing it there, and he twisted behind the wheel, putting his other hand broad and flat on her cheek, and holding her

head in the clasp of his hands. "We'll drive to Rising Fawn, Georgia," he said. "We can get married quicker there."

"All right," she said. "Any way you say it."

He turned the car away from town. Almost immediately they began to climb Sand Mountain. To Arlis the air seemed lighter here, freer. She had never gone this far away from home. Until now she had not dared to feel happy, but she began to let it in, savouring it. She rolled the window down on her side of the car so that the wind would blow freshly in her hair, and she put her arm on the doorframe, watching with intense curiosity as the mountain lifted before them. It was her wedding day, the day she had dreamed about. She could feel the soft happy trembling inside, a muffled excitement like the imprecise excitement of first snowfall. After a while she had to put her hand on Crawford's thigh, she had to touch him. "My Crawford," she said.

He smiled, and dropped a hand from the steering-wheel to cover hers. The problems and the pain of Matthew were swept out of him as by a strong wind. "We'll rent us a house," he said. He laughed. "You'd be lost without a house to work in, even if it's only a rented one."

"I don't aim to live in no boarding-house," she said spiritedly.

"I don't aim for you to, either," he said. "I want hot meals, three times a day, and our own living-room to sit in."

Crawford felt joy rising in him. He began to sing, "*Love, oh love, oh careless love; you see what love has done to me,*" laughing at the same time, and she sang with him, a little uncertainly, while he tried to harmonize with her. They came down off the mountain, turning north at Fort Payne on to Highway 11, and headed for Georgia, and finally Arlis curled against his shoulder and went drowsily to sleep.

They were married at three o'clock, in Rising Fawn, by a tall, gangly minister whose arms were too long for the sleeves of his drab black coat. His wife and six children stood by, watching as Arlis and Crawford held hands before the preacher. Arlis wore her pretty dress that Crawford had not seen before, and Crawford wore the khakis he had gone to work in that day, with a smear of dirt on them from Matthew's dam. But it did not matter. None of it mattered; the six grubby children, the minister's tired wife, the plain, worn, little living-room, Crawford's

khakis. There was a radiance in Arlis as she gladly spoke the promises, and when she turned her head to look at Crawford she could not see him clearly through the golden haze. The preacher read the words sonorously, carefully, with feeling, and after he had finished he loitered, giving them anxious advice as though he were not sure the ceremony had taken place. His wife brought out coffee and home-made cake, but they got away as quickly as they could. They wanted only the feeling of being alone with this new sensation of being married.

Back at the car, Crawford said suddenly, "I didn't kiss the bride."

"No," she said nervously. "You didn't."

"To tell you the truth," he said. "I was afraid to in front of the preacher. I didn't think he'd approve."

They laughed, and he reached for her, and the kiss made everything all right. "Now," he said, "let's go home."

The drive back was quieter, more tiring. It was dark when they arrived in town. They would stay at the hotel until Crawford had a chance to rent a house and buy furniture. The stay in the hotel would be their honeymoon.

Arlis began to feel strange as they carried her single bag into the lobby of the Rainey Hotel. There were old men she knew slightly, sitting in chairs round the wall, and they watched her while she and Crawford walked to the desk and registered.

The desk clerk picked out a key, bouncing it in his hand. "You're one of them T.V.A. fellows, ain't you?" he said curiously.

"Yes," Crawford said. "I work in the Land Office."

The man studied Crawford's khaki clothing. "I thought I'd seen you round town," he said. He looked back at Arlis. Then he bounced the key again. "Come round to the cashier's window, Mr. Gates, please," he said, "and I'll fill in the rest of the information."

Crawford grimaced at Arlis, and walked round to the barred window at the side. Standing alone, Arlis heard the muffled voices of Crawford and the clerk, the rattle of stiff paper. When they came back, the clerk was grinning. He put the key back and took out another one. "I've got a fine room for you folks," he announced. "The best in the house."

As they went up to the stairs, one of the old men got up and walked to

the desk. "That was old Matthew Dunbar's daughter, Arlis," he said.

"That who she is?" the desk clerk remarked. "Run off to get married, I reckon. Married that T.V.A. fellow today."

The watcher shook his head. "Them T.V.A. outlanders coming in here and marrying off our womenfolks," he said. "Girls can't see nothing in a man unless he wears khaki pants and walks round with a government form in his hand." He chuckled. "Old Matthew will be hot enough to spit fire. Wanta bet on it?"

In the room, Arlis and Crawford waited until the porter had deposited the suit-case and departed. Then they looked at each other. They were awkward, and the big double bed seemed very large and obtrusive.

"Those men in the lobby," Arlis said, shivering slightly.

Crawford laughed. But his laughter was gentle, understanding. "It doesn't make any difference. We're married, Arlis."

"Yes," she said, as though she had forgotten it.

Crawford was moving round the room. He looked out of the window, went to the other, and looked out there. The clerk had given them a corner room, large and high-ceilinged. "Hungry?" he said. "Shall we go down and eat supper in the dining-room?"

"No," she said before she realized the implication of her words. She stopped. "Yes. I believe I am."

He turned round. She saw his look and on the instant she was ready. She was his wife. She did not wait for him to come to her. She met him half-way, her arms going round him even as he took her into his

ARLIS'S SECOND thought, the next morning when she awoke, was of Matthew. The first was of Crawford lying asleep beside her in the bed and she turned, touching his face lightly, lovingly, with her finger

He came awake with the touch and smiled at her, moving a drowsy hand to rest on her.

Arlis sat up in bed. "Crawford, I've got to tell Papa. Today."

"Sure," Crawford said lazily, undisturbed. "We'll drive out there after breakfast. Hungry?"

"Yes," Arlis said. "I'm starved."

She flung back the bed-clothes, got out of bed and dressed. Crawford



lay watching her while he smoked a cigarette, then he got up and dressed, too, in the khakis he had worn yesterday. "I've got to get some clothes today," he said. He laughed. "Don't want to wear my wedding clothes all the time."

Arlis, combing her hair, felt a shudder pass in her. "I dread the telling," she said. "He's going to"

"It'll be all right," Crawford said reassuringly. "He had to face it sooner or later." He went behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders and leaning his head down beside her face. "He couldn't have kept us separated for ever. I wonder now why we let him do it for so long."

"Me too," she said, tilting her head back cat-like against the warmth of his body. "I was just a fool, I reckon."

It was then that the knock sounded on the door. Once. Twice. A third time. They froze at the sound, touching each other like children. "Papa," Arlis said, starting up from her seat before the mirror.

"Wait," Crawford said sharply. "Let me."

Matthew waited for a long second after the third knock and then the door opened before him, and he walked into the room. Crawford stood holding the door-knob; Arlis still held her comb in her hand. Both their faces were turned towards him, wary, careful. He had expected Arlis to be subtly changed from the daughter he had last seen. But she was not changed, heavy, graceful, her hair round her face in a comfortable, accustomed combing.

"Come on, Arlis," Matthew said. "Let's go home now." He turned towards the door, not having looked at Crawford at all.

"Wait a minute," Crawford said. "She's my wife now."

Matthew looked at him with red-rimmed eyes. "Don't get in my way," he said. He turned towards Arlis. "Are you coming?"

For a long minute she did not move, but, at last, she moved towards him. "Papa," she said. "We're man and wife."

Crawford forced himself out of the frozen stupor. He went towards Matthew, anger rising up in him. "I've had enough of this," he said. "Get out of here, Matthew. Get out before I——"

Matthew wheeled towards him. "Before you *what*, young man?"

Crawford's hands went out before him, curling into fists. "I don't

want to hurt you, but I'm going to if you don't leave this minute."

He started to move. Matthew put his hand inside his overalls, lifting out the gun. "Stand back," he said.

Crawford would not have stopped. But Arlis's voice cut between them. "Papa," she screamed. "Crawford!"

She came between them. She was not afraid for herself, but for Crawford. "You've got to stop it. Put your gun down, Papa. I'll go."

Crawford's cry was rending, low in tone. "No, Arlis," he said. "No."

But she picked up her bag and walked blindly out of the room and down the stairway. On the stairs, Matthew stopped. He put the gun into the holster.

"You *are* my daughter," he said, almost as if he did not believe it.

"Yes," she said bitterly. "I am your daughter."

Outside the hotel, Arlis looked up, finding the window instantly out of all the windows. Then they went silently down the path to the car. Matthew cranked the motor, got behind the wheel, and turned out on the road towards the cove. Arlis sat beside him, holding the blue suitcase, gripping it as though it were Crawford's hand.

"Arlis," Matthew said at last, "we'll be home soon."

She did not answer.

"Don't feel bad about it," he said. "You'll see—it's for the best."

She did not answer.

He felt depression grip him. For her he had committed himself to violence, and now she would not even answer him. She was back there, still in the hotel room, with Crawford. *What's the use*, he thought, *of any of it?* Taking up a gun for her sake, for the sake of the cove . . .

The anger began settling in him like the ashes of an old fire. He had always believed in love and reason and persuasion. He had felt the need to fight no man, except that one time against Mark; and ever after he had carried the guilt of that battle. Now, he had the new weight of this blackness in him. He started to shudder, not able to control it, and the car began to yaw in the road. He stamped on the brakes, pulling to a halt, and sat bent over the wheel, feeling the shaking going uncontrollably through him like the chill after a fever. Arlis did not even turn her head. It passed. Gradually he could bring his body under

control, except for a churning in his stomach. *My God*, he thought. *What have I done?* He tried to start the car, but his body would not obey him. "Arlis," he said. "You'll have to drive."

He might have been alone for all the notice she took. Willing a semblance of order into his muscles, he pressed the accelerator and drove slowly over the bridge, with intense concentration turning the car into the unmade road on the other side, and then he felt safer. Finally he reached the house. Miss Hattie came to the porch, a dish towel in her hand, silent, staring. He could not bear the silence any longer. "Arlis," he said, putting a hand on her arm. "It'll be all right. After a while you'll see I was right."

She went out from under the weight of his hand as though it were non-existent, and walked slowly to the porch and up the steps. Matthew watched her make her way down the passageway to her room. "Take care of her, Miss Hattie," he said helplessly.

Miss Hattie turned on him. Her eyes blazed at him, wordless, and Matthew recoiled, dazed, from her ferocity. He stood uncertainly, then turned, going back down to the dam on foot. He paused, seeing the men clustered there. He knew that they had become disturbed and uncertain since he had begun to wear his pistol; there was no knowing how long, now, they would stand by him. His eye surveyed the progress on the dam and saw that in his absence it was small. Now the men began drifting slowly back to work, and he stood watching.

He saw the dam, the long low sweep of piled and tramped earth reaching from one shoulder of hill across the mouth of the cove, stretching, unsuccessfully as yet, towards the other shoulder. Then he turned abruptly and walked away to the corn crib where the whisky was hidden. Taking the tin cup down from the nail, he filled it, but he could not bring the cup to his lips. It was Knox's whisky. He flung out the liquid against the side of the barn and hung the cup on its nail again. He sat down in the doorway of the crib, uncomfortable.

There would be no keeping Arlis, he told himself. Sooner or later she would pick up and go to Crawford, like a cat returning to the warmth of home, picking her way unerring, cat-like, through every obstacle to Crawford's side again. Knox and Jesse John were gone, too, and he

had not even gone after Jesse John. But he had wanted to face Crawford, oppose him man to man, beat him down to complete and utter defeat. He felt the shuddering start again. He forced himself to stop it.

He had wanted to kill, and he was not a killing man.

He could not remain still any longer. He went out of the back of the barn, through the pasture, climbing towards the dark cedars that marked the family burying ground. He climbed through the rusty barbed wire that encircled the plot and paused, looking upon the graves. Then he walked slowly among the old stones until he came to the hump of ground where Rice lay buried. He sat down on the ground beside his son's grave, putting his hand on the mound of earth as he would have touched Rice's shoulder. But there was no comfort, no decision, in the cold earth. Maybe you're here because of me, he told the mound silently. Maybe if I had done different . . .

He sat on the ground, his hand on the grave of his son, and thought the death of thoughts that had been long alive in his mind.

CRAWFORD KNEW that Arlis had not left him because she had wanted to. One look into her stricken departing face had told him the truth. And so he did not go after her immediately. That was not the way.

Instead, on the very first day of his honeymoon, he went to his office. He kept everything about Arlis secret, even during a conference with Sam MacClendon, who wanted to know where he had gone after the talk with Matthew. Mr. Hansen came to join them, and they discussed the steps that would be taken now. Sam said that the Condemnation Commission was having a special meeting that morning to consider the case, and then he could get an immediate eviction order from the Court. The United States Marshal would serve it on Matthew, even in the face of gunfire. Crawford thought of Arlis, back there in the cove now, and he shivered. By the time their conference was over, Crawford knew that he would have to make one last desperate attempt with Matthew. The land he had shown him so far had borne the names of other men. He must find a place that could be Dunbar.

He sat down at his desk and lit a cigarette. Then he stood up again, with the good feeling at last of something he could do. He spent half

an hour leafing through files and reports before he went downstairs to his car. When he left town he did not take the cove road. Instead he went on beyond, far beyond; farther than he had ever gone before.

MISS HATTIE did her work that day in short angry spurts of effort, attacking each task with a grim adult anger, leaving Arlis alone as Miss Hattie knew she had to be. She fed the men when they came to the house for dinner, and the men went away again. Matthew had not come. She had not expected him. Arlis lay on the bed in her closed room throughout the day, not thinking or even feeling. After Miss Hattie had given the men their supper she came to Arlis's door and tapped gently, asking if she wanted any. But Arlis did not even answer; and Miss Hattie went back to the kitchen to wash the supper dishes.

Matthew himself was wandering a restless night, back and forth on his land, and back and forth in his mind. He was tired, pacing through the dark fields, but he could not stop. And at last he could no longer avoid the conclusion he had been fighting away all the long night. He paused in the middle of the pasture. He had started with good beliefs, he knew, with beliefs he had felt true and negotiable. But a man isn't judged by his beliefs, by what he hopes to do, or by what he thinks he is doing. The goodness of intention doesn't matter, it's the results that count. Matthew thought of the broken Arlis, of his lost brother, of his dead son and the departed sons, and the rebellion in Miss Hattie's eyes when she had turned on him. His feet plodded upon his earth.

It's all gone to hell, he told himself, for the first time facing the totality of his failure. Until this moment he had kept the vision of possibility before him, the things he could achieve if he thought well and worked hard and pressed every bit of luck from the future. But now he could not believe it any more. *I can't bear to look upon my results*, he thought. *I can't endure the sum of my life*

He felt suddenly the weight of his gun, dragging him down. With frenzied hands he stripped it off and flung it into the crib, hearing it land rustling among the unshucked ears of corn. Stumbling, he walked out of the barn into the yard. Morning had come suddenly upon him, unnoticed. Now he could see the far reach and sweep of the cove, all of

it lying within the sight of his eyes, and overhead a mocking-bird burst suddenly into a trill of song.

In the darkness of his thinking, he had come to feel that he might be able to find the strength of surrender. But with the sudden sharp stab of the cove's beauty in his eye, the old longing and clinging and wanting rushed back into him. To give up in one night the beliefs of a lifetime was too much to ask of a man.

His face twisted with pain. He felt very old, cold, like the old man sleeping under three quilts in the living-room. Suddenly he felt the old urge to go to his father, tell him, ask him. Since the men had come into the cove to build the dam, the old man had begun to stir out of his lethargy. Once he had even asked about the men, and what they were doing. Matthew started up the steps of the porch.

The sound of the car reached him between his first lifting step and the second. He ran round the house to the barn, snatching open the crib door and scrabbling among the ears of corn to recover the pistol. He strapped it on again, his fingers fumbling with the hurry, and he could feel the throb of danger in his blood.

When he ran towards the cove the two men on watch were moving, roused by the sound of the car. But Matthew was the first to reach the dam. He ran up it and stopped as the car came round the curve. It was Crawford's—only Crawford's car. He turned towards the men below. "It's all right," he said. "It's not them. Not yet."

Crawford got out of his car. "You come after Arlis?" Matthew said.

Crawford's face was white, grim, in the early-morning light. He looked as though he had not slept, either. "No," he said. "Not this time." He stopped. "They were coming this morning, Matthew. The United States Marshal and his men."

"Were?" Matthew said.

Crawford steadied himself against the sight of the gun on Matthew's hip. He began climbing the dam towards Matthew, feeling the distance a very long way. "I want to talk to you," he said at last, with the precise tone and inflection he had used so often to Matthew before. "After the first shot has been fired, it'll be too late." He braced himself. "I want to show you some land," he said. "Will you come with me?"

Matthew exploded. "Good Godamighty. You want to show me land? *Now*, when The Law is coming?"

"I told you," Crawford said. "They *were* coming this morning. But I talked to the marshal, and got him to wait. They won't be here till tomorrow at ten o'clock. We've got until then."

"Why did you do that? I don't need you to . . ."

"Because I had to have one last chance before the shooting started. It wasn't easy to get them to hold off. Will you go with me now? Remember you promised you'd go any time."

Out of all that was between them, with his thoughts of the night fresh in him, Matthew knew he owed Crawford at least this much. "You're sure they're not coming today?" he said.

"Yes," Crawford said. "I promise you that."

Matthew turned his head. The men had gone back to the house now he was here. He would not even have to tell them. "All right, son," he said to Crawford. "I'll go with you, if you think it'll do any good. I don't want shooting any more than you do."

Crawford felt the leap of the new chance in him like a game fish. "Let's go," he said, turning. "Let's go right now."

"Where are we heading?" Matthew said, getting into the car.

Crawford started the motor. "Let me show you instead of telling you. You'll have to see it for yourself anyway."

They went across the highway and down an unmade road on the other side, following the river towards the dam. Then the road began looping up the side of the mountain. They could see Chickasaw Dam far below, a definite break in the river. The grey concrete powerhouse looked almost white in the sunlight. Water was banked behind the dam though the gates were still down. There were only a few figures working round the south embankment. The dam was almost finished. "It's raw-looking now," Crawford said. "But after the grass has had time to cover the scars of its building, it'll look as though it had always been there." He gazed at Matthew compassionately. "Kids growing up will never know that it was any other way."

They drove on, turning away from the river, going deeper into the mountains, following a road paralleling a creek. The trees were close

round them. Part of the way the creek flowed white-watered below them through a rocky gorge. The road became very rough and the car bounced in the ruts. There were no houses; they were below the dam, now, in rougher country than the river area where Dunbar's Cove lay.

Matthew roused up, interested now. Crawford grinned. "It's a little rough," he said. "But we'll make it."

A couple of miles farther on, Crawford turned off the road where the close-lying hills suddenly opened out round the creek. A smaller stream flowed to a juncture here, making a tiny cove. There were clearings, grown up in bush and briers, among the trees. Crawford stopped the car and they could hear the sweet talking of the joining waters flowing quietly together.

"Well," Crawford said, "here it is. What do you think of it?"

Matthew was bewildered. He got out and looked round him.

"Matthew," Crawford said, following him, "no man has ever laid his name on this cove. It's been government land since it was taken from the Indians. Now they've put it up for sale. It's yours, Matthew. Yours if you want it."

Matthew stooped and grubbed up a handful of the soil. It was rich and black. He rubbed it with his fingers, remembering that so far this spring he had not yet found the time to turn his own soil. He looked round again. This cove was smaller than the Dunbar by at least a third. But it was well watered and drained by the two creeks and the trees were thinly spaced so that clearing would be comparatively easy. Farther up the creek there was a high, deep-green-cedared knoll where a house could be built. From the front porch a man would be able to look out upon all his land.

"I should have found this cove in the first place, Matthew," Crawford said eagerly. "I should have known what you needed. But I thought only of putting my idea into your head, not of strengthening and building your own. Look at it, Matthew. It's new, waiting for your labour. You can shape it, the way David Dunbar shaped Dunbar's Cove."

Matthew could feel the pull of it. It was fresh land, just as Crawford said, and it was the first land he had ever seen apart from Dunbar's Cove that pleased his eye. But then he felt the firming of rejection in

him at the thought of his own cove. "You still want me to kill Dunbar's Cove," he said flatly.

"Do you think Dunbar's Cove will die without that land? Your ideas are mighty small, Matthew, if that's true. But it won't die."

Matthew started walking away from him. He didn't want to hear it. He wanted to put his hands over his ears to shut out the words the way a child does. But Crawford followed him.

"Dunbar's Cove is not in the land, Matthew. It's in *you*—and as long as you hold it true, it'll keep on living. Why, you can get a new start, take the good of the old and put it with the good of the new and make a greater thing than there ever was before."

"Shut up," Matthew said. "Shut up, Crawford."

"The land is not Dunbar. *You* are the Dunbar."

"I said shut up."

Crawford walked round in front of him. He thrust his face into Matthew's face. "*You're* the Dunbar, Matthew," Crawford said. "Not the earth, not the river and the trees. It's *you*."

Involuntarily Matthew swept his eyes over the cove again, and the beauty of the new earth was an unexpected weakness in him. With the thought of the new land, he could feel the old David Dunbar in him emerging. Instead of merely preserving and passing on, he would be commencing and constructing. He would be nearer to the original Dunbar than any of the men in between.

"You know what you're saying, Crawford." He spoke it painfully. "All the time, you're saying, I've been believing in the wrong thing. You're saying I've wasted the substance of my life."

Crawford's voice gentled. "No. I'd never say that. All I'm saying is this: You've believed in the right thing—you just pinned it down in the wrong place." Crawford stepped close again and touched Matthew's right temple with his fingers. "Here," he said. "It's here."

Matthew turned away, and Crawford let him go. Matthew walked to the bank of the smaller creek and sat down on the ground, looking at the flowing water. It had been a long time since he had seen flowing water, for the creek whose course he had changed was now almost dry, pooled into muddy, fishless pools. He picked up a handful of small

stones and began flipping them into the creek. The pebbles were like marbles in his hands, smoothed over the years by the water. He flipped them one by one into the water, wondering where they had started; there was no telling where they would stop. Perhaps they would keep on rolling until they were worn away out of their individual forms into the anonymous earth again.

When his hand was empty he stood up. He walked back to where Crawford waited by the car, smoking. "We'd better get back," he said.

His voice was low, passionless, and he spoke as though in the presence of the dead. Crawford flipped the cigarette to the earth and ground it out carefully with the toe of his shoe. Then he went round the car to get behind the steering-wheel. He stopped, looking over the bonnet of the car to Matthew. "I'll quit the T.V.A.," he said.

Matthew looked up at him, and smiled. It was the gentle smile that Crawford had not seen for a long time. "I wouldn't ask you to do that, Crawford," Matthew said. "There's no need for it."

They got in and Crawford drove out of the small cove. They were silent as the car bounced back past the creek and the rock gorge, until they crested where they could see Chickasaw Dam below. Crawford stopped. He took out his cigarettes and offered one to Matthew. Matthew took it, and Crawford held the match.

"Well," Crawford said, without threat or challenge. "They'll be raising the gates before long. Chickasaw is almost finished."

Matthew looked down towards the dam. He was impatient to get home, for he knew suddenly that he must go to the old man. The words that Crawford had spoken were rattling inside him like the worn pebbles from the creek bank he had held in his hand. But he did not show the impatience. "Yes," he said. He looked over Crawford's shoulder. "My boy helped build that," he said. "He run a bulldozer. And now he's off somewhere building some other dam."

"It's a good work," Crawford said.

Matthew looked at him, and then away. "I guess it is," he said.

Crawford turned, shutting the dam out of his sight. "Be careful, Matthew," he said. "Tomorrow. Don't get yourself killed."

Matthew could not look at him. "There ought to be a place in life,"

he said, "where a man could stop and see where he is. Then, if he wanted to, he ought to be able to go back and start over again, with the wisdom he's gained." He looked at Crawford. "But when a man sets his foot to a road, he's got to travel it out to the end. All he can hope is to gather up his learning and pass it on to them that come after." He looked away. "I'll be careful. As careful as they'll let me be. Now take me home, son. Take me home."

Without either of them looking at Chickasaw again, they went on. When Crawford stopped the car before the bulwark of the dam Matthew got out quickly. Crawford put his head out as though to speak. But Matthew was not listening. Crawford drew in his head again, wordless, and drove away, and Matthew was not aware of his going.

Chapter 12

MATTHEW went on past the dam to the house, and stopped in the passageway for a moment, gathering himself. Then he opened the door into the living-room that was the bedroom of the old man. The old man was asleep in his chair. Matthew put his hand on him, gently. "Papa," he said.

The old man opened his eyes, blurry with age and sleep. "What is it?" he said in his whispering, breath-short voice. "What is it?"

Matthew stood looking down at him. The face was sunken, the skin like parchment stretched dry and tight. But he was his father. He was all that was left; he was all that Matthew could find to turn to. Matthew sat down. "How have you been, Papa?" he said.

The old man struggled his head up. "Fine, son," he said. "Fine."

"Papa," Matthew said. "I'm going to give up the cove. I'm going to let them have it."

It was not true; the decision had not been made. But he wanted to know how the words would feel in his mouth, spoken out coldly.

Perhaps it was the quickening of spring in his old blood; perhaps it was the thin flow of fear in him at having been awakened. Whatever the reason, the old man lifted his head. "Give up the cove?" he said

sharply. "What's this about giving up the cove?"

Matthew was startled. He jerked forward, seeing in the old man's eyes a wary bright intelligence that had not been there for years. The load lightened in Matthew. He could tell it now, and out of his lifetime of living his father would know the answer that Matthew had been unable to find. Looking into the old man's face, he told the story from the very beginning. The old man listened; his face lightened and saddened, he wept old tears, his hands moved in sympathy as Matthew described the dam.

Then it was done, purged out of Matthew, and he had told it all. He leaned forward anxiously to catch the returning voice. Instead he saw the brightness fading out of the old man's eyes, as though Matthew had never told a word.

A smothering desperation swept up in Matthew. "Papa," he said, his voice urgent. "Tell me what to do. Papa . . ."

The old man's head lifted again. The flaccid lips moved. "The cove," the old man said. "Dunbar's Cove . . ."



Then the old man stood up, slowly, uncertainly. Matthew reached out a hand to help him. But the old man motioned him away with feeble anger. He began moving across the broad reach of floor towards the far-away bed, and at last he achieved it. He sat down and fumbled his clothes off until he wore only the long, baggy underwear. That done, he rolled over into the warm centre. His hands scrabbled up the bed-clothes. Then he looked up at Matthew. Far back in the crystal centre of his mind he knew it all, and he stared compassionately at his son. But he was an old man, and his understanding was beyond his own reach. "Matthew," he said, his voice so weak he wondered if he could be heard at all, "it's time."

Matthew leaned over him. "What, Papa? It's time for what?"

The old man rolled his head on the pillow in a sudden agony. Then he stopped, lying still and calm. "I'm going to die," he said. "It's time for me to die now."

Matthew looked down at his father. Deep inside him he had still believed that in the extremity of decision the old man would come to his rescue. Now this last bulwark was gone for ever. The old man had understood, and this was his only answer.

With gentle hands Matthew straightened the bed-clothes over the old man. "Go on back to sleep now, Papa," he said. "Get your rest."

He straightened, feeling suddenly the full impact of his own sleepless night. But there was no time for sleeping now. Matthew brought a chair to the bedside and sat down in it. He began to wait with the old man.

ALL DAY Matthew did not move from the bedside except when he got up and went into the kitchen to tell Miss Hattie and Arlis. Miss Hattie looked up when she saw Matthew.

"Sit down and have a cup of coffee," she said.

"I can't now," Matthew said. "Papa is dying, Miss Hattie."

Arlis lifted her eyes to look at Matthew. "But what's the matter?" she said. It was the first time she had spoken to him since he brought her home. "He was all right . . ."

"He decided it was time," Matthew said.

"You can't do that," Miss Hattie said in a harried voice. "You can't just lay down and quit."

"Yes," Matthew said quietly. "When you're old enough, when you're strong enough, you can do that." He hesitated. "Don't feel bad about it. He's had everything a man could ask for in this life." Matthew moved his head. "I'll be in there," he said.

Through the night the old man's breathing was a shallow whistling. At midnight Matthew's vigil was interrupted by Arlis. "Papa," she whispered. "Get some sleep now. I'll sit with him."

"You don't have to," Matthew said gently.

"I want to," she said.

He watched her, a softening in him. He did not want to leave the old man. But he stood up, relinquishing the chair. "All right," he said. "Just while I get some fresh air."

Some of the men were still in the porch, the ends of their cigarettes glowing in the dark. They asked about the old man.

"He's still living," Matthew said. "I don't know for how long."

One of the men cleared his throat apologetically. "Did you settle anything with the T.V.A. fellow while you were gone today?"

"No," Matthew said. "They'll be here at ten o'clock tomorrow."

They wanted to ask him more, but his voice forbade it. He went back into the house. "Go on now," he told Arlis. "I'll need you here in the morning, while I'm busy at the dam. So get your sleep now." He sat down again, settling himself into the watch, holding his father's hand. After a while, his brother John came in and sat with him. Then, after an hour, two hours, John went away.

It was at dawn that Matthew felt a change. The old man was not struggling any longer. He seemed to sink away into his body, withdrawing, closing shutter after shutter behind him, and his hand slipped from Matthew's grasp. But when the sun struck the first ray of light into the room he was still faintly breathing.

With the sun, life stirred again. The men were in the kitchen with coffee and subdued voices. Matthew felt he would last through this day at least. He must brace himself now to protect the cove, while the old man still lived, against the onslaught from outside.

It came sooner than he had expected. Matthew heard feet running towards the house, a clatter in the porch, and a voice calling. He went to the door and opened it. It was his nephew Ralph. "Uncle Matthew," the boy said. "That Gates fellow is down there to see you."

It was not yet ten o'clock, but Matthew knew what Crawford wanted. "Tell him I can't come now," he said.

Ralph went away. The men finished eating and, uneasy, started down the passageway. Matthew met them at the living-room door. "They'll be here soon," he said. "I reckon you-all had better stay up here at the house. I'll go down to the dam myself when it's time."

The men exchanged uncertain glances. His brother John frowned. "I'll go down with you, Matthew," he said. "It's my place."

Matthew nodded. Arlis came into the room and he gave her the chair, going into the kitchen, knowing that he would need his breakfast. He sat down at the table, rubbing his hand over his bearded face. For two nights now, he had not slept. But he was beyond tiredness, even in his mind. With dogged duty, he ate. Then he stood up and took out his pistol, checking the loads. He started towards the old man's room again. But as he reached the door, he heard the sound of several cars at the entrance of the cove. "I've got to go, Arlis," he said. "Call me . . . no matter what."

John was already at the dam, peering over the top with a rifle in his hands. *I'm asking a lot of him*, Matthew thought as he hurried to join him. Beyond, he could see a cluster of cars, and men behind the cars, as though fearful of shots. He inched up the face of the dam to look at them. There were four of them, in addition to Crawford. One of them carried an odd-looking weapon that Matthew did not recognize as a tear-gas gun. As he watched, they spaced out and began walking towards him. In the lead was a tall, heavy-set man dressed in grey. Lying against the face of the dam, watching over it, Matthew felt a tightening of his guts.

"All right," he said. His voice was calm, clear, loud. "That's far enough right there."

They stopped. The grey man made a step, then two, ahead of the rest. With his gun in his hand, Matthew stepped over the top of the dam.

But then the grey man stopped, too. Things seemed to happen slowly, with a retarded motion, in the hot bright spring sunlight.

"Mr. Dunbar," the man said. "I'm United States Marshal Wilson. It's my duty to evict you from this government property. I waited until today, like I promised. Are you ready to give up the cove?"

Matthew thought of the old man lying in his bed. If only the old man could tell him before he died, just once, even in a muted whisper, Matthew would have the answer to all this—the one, straight, true, hard answer—and he would obey. "I need a little more time," he said. "If you can give me one more day . . ."

Marshal Wilson studied him. Crawford stared into Matthew's face. "Will you promise to give up the cove peacefully, then?" he asked.

Matthew shifted his eyes. "I won't promise a thing." He added stubbornly, "I need one more day."

"Why?" the marshal asked bluntly.

Matthew jerked his head towards the house. "My daddy is dying up there."

The words stopped them. But suspicion moved in the marshal's eyes. "If you'll give me your solemn promise . . ."

Matthew shook his head.

"Then what's the difference between today and tomorrow?" the marshal said. "No use putting it off."

Matthew had not believed it would work. But he had had to try. He turned to go back behind the bulwark of the dam, and he thought, *Here it is. There's no more time, now. Here it is.* He moved slowly, hoping something would happen to break the chain of circumstance before it solidified into action.

And it was then that Arlis's voice reached him from the house. "Papa," she called, her hands cupping her mouth. "Papa, come quick."

He dropped down behind the dam. "The old man is dying. I've got to go to the nouse," he said rapidly to John. "You've got to hold them until I can get back. They mustn't disturb the old man." He looked into John's white face. "Can you do it?"

John nodded.

"I'll be back as quick as I can." There was no time for any more.

"He's calling for you," Arlis said when he reached her.

Matthew hurried into the living-room. The old man's head was turned fretfully on the pillow. His eyes opened slowly. "Matthew?" he said "Yes, Papa. I'm here."

"Stay with me, son," the old man whispered. His eyes closed again.

Matthew sank into the chair, taking the old man's hand in both his own. His father would never give him his hard sure answer now; it was too late, the old man's spirit too removed. But within himself, Matthew knew at last, he had found his own answer.

For Crawford had been right all along. Here on this little plot of earth called Dunbar's Cove Matthew had built a capital out of the past. Matthew had grown up in that past world, and found it good. But the world changes. Matthew knew the changes; he had based his life upon the seasons' rhythm. Perhaps there was a deeper change than that, a constant shift and altering that did not return again to the starting point, as the year did, but went on and on. If that was true, a man would need to be aware of that shift and alteration, or he would fruitlessly earth his seeds in the frozen death of winter, and expect to harvest them in August.

He had clung too long, he thought, to the season of his youth, distorting and making bitter the time of his children, alienating them. He had been stubborn and intransigent: he had thought intransigence was his only weapon against the changing of his world.

But what was it Crawford had said at the new cove? "You've believed in the right thing, Matthew—you just pinned it down in the wrong place. Dunbar's Cove is not in the land. It's in *you*—and as long as you hold it true, it'll keep on living."

Why, this was the true saying, the hard saying he had hoped for all along from his father, the saying the past could never give. With renewed tenderness, Matthew leaned forward as he held the old man's hand.

MATTHEW did not know when the old man died. He had not sat there long. His father lay quiescent, with the steady rattle and husk of his breathing, completely at peace; and then the breathing simply

stopped. Matthew lifted his head, startled. He put his head down on the thin chest, and stillness answered him. Matthew rose. Gently he took the arms and crossed them on the breast. He did not feel anything at this final moment; only the release that his withered father must have known. He went to the kitchen door. "Children," he said. "Your grandfather is dead."

He watched them a moment, to see if they would need him under the impact of the news, sudden though expected, as the news of death is always sudden. They put their heads down on the table and wept. They were all right.

Matthew walked out of the house, towards the dam. He went straight to John, walking upright, in plain target-sight of the marshal and his deputies. "John," he said gently. "Your daddy is dead." He took a deep breath and walked on towards Crawford and the marshal and his men. They had waited for him, he saw; they knew what was happening.

"Crawford," Matthew said. "You did make me a true promise yesterday, didn't you? I can buy that cove you showed me."

"Yes," Crawford said. His voice lifted in gladness. "I put down a binder payment for you myself."

"Marshal Wilson," Matthew said with dignity. "If you give me the time to bury my dead, I'll surrender the cove now."

"Matthew," Crawford said, his voice choked, "Matthew." He took a step towards him.

But Matthew was watching the marshal. "Of course," Marshal Wilson said. There was relief in his voice. "All the time you need."

Matthew remembered the gun on his hip. He unbuckled the belt and took it from about his waist, holding the holstered gun in one hand. He turned round, looking towards the dam. "Crawford," he said. He felt a tightness in his throat, a tight grip as though something deep in him was trying to choke off the words. But he cleared his throat. "Go to Arlis, son," he said. "She needs you. Go on, now."

THEY BURIED the old man very simply. Only the immediate family came, and there was no ceremony in the house; the family went directly to the burying ground. For the second time in a year, Matthew followed

behind the wagon, walking with the same slow stubborn pace. When the wagon went through the broken wire fence a thought occurred to him and he turned to Crawford. "The water won't come this high, will it?" he said.

Crawford shook his head. "No The T.V A. will move your graves, though, if you want them to."

Matthew looked at the rough-hewn fieldstone tablets. He shook his head. "No," he said. "Let them stay."

The men placed the coffin by the grave. Wind ruffled the leaves of the preacher's Bible with a small intimate tearing sound. Matthew listened while the preacher read, and then the coffin was lowered on plough lines, and he took the shovel into his shovel-worn hands to drop in the first thudding load of earth. Then he waited while his kinsmen filled the grave.

He was asked gently, in the customary embarrassment, about tramping the grave. For a brief instant he felt as though he had been translated back to the burial of Rice and a sudden grief tore in his throat. Then he nodded his head.

While he waited, he walked up and down the short rows of graves, looking at the headstones. Rice was still without one; this spring he would find time for his, and for the old man's. He saw that the others were waiting for him, and he came back, stopping beside the grave. Without knowing he was going to do it, he sat down on the earth beside the grave. He put his hands over his face and cried as a child cries, the sobs hard and racking, open and unashamed, in the way a man never cries except in the uttermost stress of his life.

Embarrassed, they clustered away from him, waiting beyond the fence without looking at him. He put a hand on the grave, clutching up a fistful of the earth and holding it, sitting and weeping.

But it was soon over, as the turbulence of a thunderstorm ends, leaving the air clearer and sweeter for its passing. Matthew stood up. He looked down at the small clutch of soil within his grasp and then he opened his hand and spilt it back to earth. He walked to join the others. "Come on," he said. "We've got a lot of work to do if we aim to get moved. I want to get a crop into the ground this year."

THERE WERE a great many things to be done, decisions and choices of a kind Matthew had never faced before. He had to plan for stock and feed and household furniture; to think about how they would live until he could build a house in the new cove; and about planting a crop, for he couldn't afford to miss an entire crop year. A new barn would have to come before living quarters for he had the stock and the feed to think about.

"If there was time, the T.V.A. would let you move these buildings," Crawford told him. "But there isn't time now."

"What about a tent?" Matthew said. "We could put down a floor for it and by harvest time I could get a house built." So he went to town and found a big tent. It cost a lot more than he thought it should. But he bought it, anyway.

Matthew worked from daylight to dark, lying down at night with a welcome tiredness in his bones. Each afternoon Crawford came to the cove after his T.V.A. hours. There had been no discussion of the marriage, but once Crawford let drop that his work was almost finished, and Matthew knew he would soon be transferred to a newer project. He could depend on keeping Arlis only for the move.

Lorryload after lorryload—gradually the cove emptied, and finally the day came: the last load was placed on the hired lorry, and Matthew checked through the rooms before the final departure. Then he came out of the empty house. It was the middle of the afternoon, and they had to start for the other cove to get settled for the night. For the year. For his lifetime. But he paused, and looked back at the house and the barn.

Arlis and Crawford were sitting in the loaded lorry. He himself would drive the Model-T. He walked slowly towards them. "Well," he said. "I reckon that's it."

"Yes," Crawford said. "Are you sorry that you didn't hang on?"

Matthew studied it. "No," he said honestly. He stopped. "The fact is," he said, "I haven't had much time to think about it." He smiled, briefly. "I don't reckon I ever will."

"Well, then," Crawford said. "If you're ready—let's go."

Crawford ground the starter on the lorry. Matthew started towards

the old Model-T and then stopped. "Wait just a minute," he said.

Going to the lorry, Matthew found a bucket and a fire shovel, and went back inside the house. He knelt before the fire-place, dug into the ashes with the shovel, and found live coals. He filled the bottom of the bucket with ashes, then dumped the middle full of glowing coals from the fire that had not died since old David Dunbar had first kindled it. He topped it off with another preserving layer of ashes and went out again. He handed the bucket up to Crawford.

"I'm a fool," he said defiantly. "I know all I've got to do to build a fire is strike a match. But you take that bucket of coals with you and start a fire with it as soon as you get there."

Crawford looked at him. "All right, Matthew."

"You can't just let a fire like that go out," Matthew said. His voice was embarrassed, apologetic.

Crawford smiled. "Of course you can't."

Matthew watched the lorry pull out of the cove, and then he turned. "Miss Hattie," he called. "We're ready to go."

She did not answer. He walked round into the back yard. He saw her standing at the edge of the thicket, looking into it, her back to him. Her straight, thin shoulders were slumped. She did not turn. "I don't want to go," she said obstinately. "This is home."

He went to her, put his arm round her shoulders. Her face was streaked with tears. "Home is over yonder now," he said gently. "Home is where you want it to be." He tightened his arm round her. "Come on now. We've got a lot to do." She looked back with longing at the thicket. But she let Matthew lead her to the car.

Matthew drove out of the cove without looking back. There was no call to look back. Crawford had been right; Matthew was taking the Dunbar with him to be seeded in the new place just as he would plant corn and cotton there. Life had gone out of the cove with their departing. It lay idle, anonymous, waiting for the water.

CRAWFORD came early to the new cove the next morning to help them get settled. Already smoke lifted from the knoll where the tent stood, and there was the beginning of a road where the lorry and the car

and the wagon had passed back and forth. Matthew had made a place for the stock, fastening wire from tree to tree. Chickens were ranging about, picking busily at the rich new supply of insects. Matthew watched from the tent as Arlis met Crawford. They climbed towards him, hand in hand. "Well," Crawford said cheerfully. "I thought you'd bring a crew out here to build you a house and a barn today."

"I've got a crew coming tomorrow for the barn," Matthew said. "But I'll build my own house. Them carpenters can't build the kind of house I want." Matthew smiled. "I'm gonna build me an old timey house. From logs. It'll outlast ten of them frame houses. I aim to do it just like old David would have." He looked at the sun. "Well, if you've come here to work, come on. We'd better get started. I aim to get some corn planted this year, anyway."

"Stand aside," Miss Hattie said, sweeping towards the front of the tent. They all moved away so that she would have room to sweep out the board floor on to the ground. Matthew started down the hill. Then he caught Crawford's hesitation, and looked back at him.

"Well," Crawford cleared his throat. "They're closing the Land Office in town today. We've all finished now. And I——"

"And you're being transferred. You aim to take Arlis with you."

"That's about the size of it," Crawford admitted. "We'd just like to have your good will on it, sir."

Matthew looked at them. "Well," he said. He put his hand on his mouth, wiping it needlessly. "So you finally asked my blessing. You can have it—on one condition." He looked down at the cove. "I've got a lot of work to do, and just one pair of hands. If you and Arlis would be willing to stay here in Dunbar's Cove, I'll gladly give you the word of my mouth." He kept his face stern, while his eyes watched for the faintest shade of resistance in Crawford or in Arlis, ready to retract his words. Then he began to smile, for he could see the hope and the promise leap into Crawford's face.

Crawford dropped Arlis's hand. "I never thought you'd want me," he said. "It never crossed my mind."

"Do you really want us to stay?" Arlis said.

He looked at her, then back at Crawford. "Yes," he said. "Dunbar's

Cove can be yours after me." He had never said the words before. Now he was saying them, as his father had, and his grandfather, and all the way back to old David. But only he and the original David had given a new and starting thing. "One day, I'll be ready to sit down, too, like the old man. I'd like to know that it was left safe in your hands."

For so many years he had studied his male children to know which of them he should lay this on. Not once had he thought of Arlis and the man she would marry. But he knew that it was right. He had made the best and only choice.

Matthew clapped Crawford on the shoulder. "Think about it, son. Talk about it between you. You can let me know what you decide."

They were still. All except Miss Hattie. She flounced past them, angrily, saying to Arlis, "Well, there's your old house back. You can sweep your own floors from now on."

They laughed, and she went burning away. Matthew lifted his arm, pointing. "When you make up your mind, son," he said, "I'll be over yonder, working." He went on, smiling to himself. He knew Crawford's deep hunger for home, and he knew what the answer would be. For Crawford was his son, as surely as though he had nurtured him. He turned. There was one more thing. "Crawford," he said. "Can you find out where Knox is working now?"

"Sure," Crawford said. "If he's still with the T.V.A."

"I want to write him," Matthew said. "And Jesse John, too. So that they can find us when they get ready to come home for a visit."

He went on down the hill hurrying, eager for the labour of the day

MISS HATTIE went burning away from their laughter, straight down the knoll, across the flat, and up among the pines on the other side. Now Arlis would take back the kitchen from her and use it to feed snotty-nosed young'uns. Miss Hattie's responsibility had been taken away from her, and she was a child again. She stopped, breathing hard, and looked back down the way she had come. The cove was beautiful, all right. But it would never be the way the cove had been at home. It was too raw, too unfinished, without secure walls against the world, or even the shelter of the old thicket.

She started on again. She didn't want to think about the thicket. When she had not been able to avoid the fact that they were going to move, she had headed blindly, instinctively, for its shelter, but she had not been able to enter it. It had been a long time since she had tried and it seemed to have grown more impenetrable. She had been standing, baffled, outside its protectiveness when Matthew had come to lead her away. The thicket was not for her any longer. Now the kitchen was not hers, either.

She crested a hill and stopped again, panting hard. She pushed her hair back and took a handkerchief from her pocket to dab the sweat from her upper lip.

"Well," a voice said "Where could you be going in such an all-fired hurry?"

She brought herself up short. A tall, lean, red-haired boy sat on a hickory stump, grinning at her. "Who're you?" she blurted.

"Me?" he drawled. "I live round here. You belong to them new folks who just moved in down in the cove?"

"Yes," she said shortly. "And I'd better be getting back down there. They probably need me for something right now."

She started back, flustered by the irritating grin on his face. "Wait a minute," he called after her. "You don't have to be in such an all-fired sweat to get home. Talk a little bit."

She turned round, patting the perspiration on her face with the handkerchief. Then she came slowly back towards him. He had green eyes to go with the red hair. "Where do *you* live?" she said.

He waved an arm. "Little ways over yonder." He grinned. "Looks like me and you are going to be neighbours."

She looked down at the ground. She put her hand to her hair, smoothing it, feeling suddenly cool and ladylike. "Yes," she said. "It does look that way." She lifted her eyes to his face. The grin wasn't so irritating, after all. When you studied him a little, it was even rather nice. Then, under her gaze, it went away and she could see into his eyes. She looked quickly away again.

"What's your name?" he asked, in a different voice.

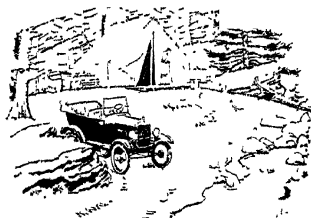
She told him. Then he told her his own.

VISTA: *Rendezvous with Tomorrow*

IN THE nameless cove that was once Dunbar, men come when the water is already backing up the river, behind the great new dam. They skin the cove with frantic efficiency, slashing at trees and bushes, cutting the stumps close to the ground. The clearing boss himself goes round to burn the brush and the buildings, starting with the house. First he goes inside to be sure none of the men are hiding away there to sleep. His footsteps echo loudly in the empty rooms. In the living-room, there is a tiny curl of smoke in the fire-place. "That's a lasting fire," he thinks, as he splashes paraffin round the walls. On impulse, he lights a twist of paper from the nearly dead bed of coals. He throws the paper into the paraffin and hurries away to the other buildings.

Smoke and flame and ash mount swirling into the sky. When the fires finish their work the men depart. The place where the water will come is clean, empty, prepared.

That night, inch by inch, the water searches and covers the cove. It touches the stone foundation of the burnt-away doorstep, and rises over it. The live coals left hiss against the water and die, giving off one last expiration of steam. The water lies quiet and still. The flame is gone from the cove; but, elsewhere, the tamed water of this wild river is running with twisting power through smooth steel turbines. And its strength is lighting new flames over the old land



Borden Deal



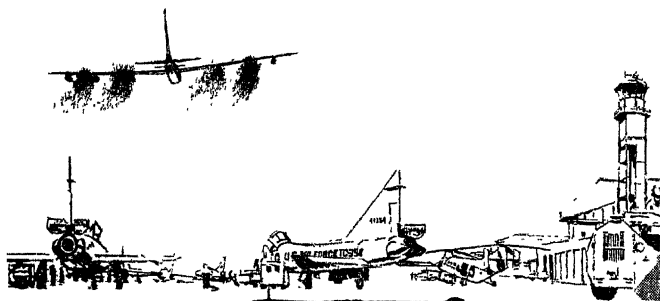
BORDEN DEAL was an impressionable boy of eleven when the Tennessee Valley Authority was created in 1933. The son of a cotton farmer in T V A country, he clearly remembers the building of the great dams. He remembers the hostility it met from local farmers, although their own efforts to scrape a living had always been handicapped by flooding and lack of modern equipment. But he also recalls how suspicion and resentment gave way to confidence and a new prosperity as the vast hydro-electric scheme spread its benefits over the land.

Today, as similar projects are launched in India, Rhodesia and elsewhere, the story of *Dunbar's Cove* has a world-wide significance. No one is better qualified to tell it than Borden Deal.

THE BIG X

A condensation of the book by

HANK SEARLS



Illustrations by Walter Richards



"The Big X" is published by Heinemann, London

THE MEN who test today's rocket ships live under extraordinary pressure. As pilot of the experimental Big X, Mitch Westerly knew and loved the freedom of outer space, where earthly problems cease to exist and man is in harmony with the music of the spheres.

But Mitch also found himself the centre of bitter controversy within his own firm, and on his most crucial flight he was to carry with him a fateful problem from which there was no escape. Upon his decision would depend the future safety of other pilots, and the happiness of the woman he loved.

Here is a gripping novel, fresh and vital as tomorrow's headlines, which gives to the reader a better understanding of the loyalties and courage behind every new report of man's adventuring into space.

"Tense, chiselled writing, charged with controlled suspense . . . makes compulsive reading."—*Daily Mail*

"Highly exciting . . . first rate."

—*Oxford Times*



MITCH WESTERLY shifted uncomfortably on his parachute. His seat itched maddeningly, and there was no way to ease the irritation because he was strapped so tightly into his tiny cockpit that he could barely squirm. Haemorrhoids were an occupational disease; if you pulled too many g's* too many times you were bound to get them; he had had them before. Now that the sickening moments at 130,000 feet had passed, now that the weightless ride through the ionosphere was over and the critical seconds of re-entry into the atmosphere were conquered, he had time to be uncomfortable. He had time, too, with the rumble of his engines stilled, to plan his landing. He peered out of his tiny window, banked slightly and looked down to orient himself.

The earth, fifteen miles below, was a tan smudge. For a second he knew panic, wondering whether in recovering from the wild moments before burn-out† and at re-entry he had strayed too far into Nevada to return to Edwards Air Force Base and the flat safety of Rogers Dry Lake. He was about to call Vickers, his chase pilot, when his eyes separated from the brown mist a light area near the southern tip of the Sierras. It could only be Palmdale; the lake must be directly below him. With a grateful glow he began to spiral earthward.

* *Ed* The term "g" is used by aircraft pilots to express the force accompanying a manoeuvre. If a pilot turns an aircraft so that the force acting on the aircraft and himself is three times the normal force—that is the force equal to that imposed by three times the force of gravity—then he is said to be "pulling a 3 g turn." "Pulling" because the control column has to be pulled back to initiate and maintain the manoeuvre

† *Ed* The burn-out point is the stage in flight when the motor of a rocket engine stops through lack of fuel

At twenty thousand feet, his headset crackled into life. He heard Lou Haskel growl nervously, "Vickers, you got him in sight yet?"

Colonel Vickers in his Air Force jet sounded startlingly close. "Sure, Lou—I'm practically flying wing on him. Mitch, do you read me?"

"Five by five, Colonel," Mitch answered. "Would you people pipe down while I get this thing on the deck?"

He turned towards the lake, gauging his distance. In a giant race-track pattern he lost altitude; a minute north, a minute west, a minute south. Finally he turned to line himself up with an imaginary runway on the lake. Sitting far ahead of his ridiculously tiny wings, he had no real frame of reference in landing. All he could see through his narrow windscreen was the lance-like probe jutting ahead of him.

"O.K., Colonel," he said.

Vickers chanted the altitudes. "Eighty feet, seventy, sixty. You're on the glide path. . . ." The chant went on. "Ten feet Raise your right wing. . . . O.K. Eight, six, four, three, two"

He heard a quiet "chirp . . . chirp . . ." as the midget tyres touched the hard surface. Some of the taut strings in his body loosened. George Vickers blasted over him, saluting him with a lazy slow roll as he climbed into the morning sun. "Why, Mitch," he said, "that there rocket ship's a piece of cake. I could fly it myself."

Mitch coasted to a stop far across the lake bed. He lifted his canopy and removed his pressure helmet, cringing under the desert heat. He would wait for the cars to arrive for help in getting out. Now he sat drained and exhausted, but as always strangely fulfilled.

As usual, Brock Stevenson was the first man up the side of the ship. He helped Mitch shrug off his harnesses, and they stood by the plane, waiting for the next company car to arrive. "What happened?" Brock asked.

Mitch glanced at him. "What do you mean?"

"Just before your rockets burnt out, we heard Vickers ask you what was going on."

Mitch shrugged. "I don't know. We'll have to look at the film.

When I hit a speed of Mach six,* something seemed to take over."

Another company car pulled up. Lou Haskel, the pale, heavy-faced project engineer, peered from the back seat. "Ride back to the hangar with me, Westerly," he said.

Mitch crawled into the front seat. The car glided towards the monstrous hangars shimmering in the distance. "What happened?" Haskel asked.

"I don't know," Mitch said. He turned to the young engineer driving the car. "You got a cigarette, Ron?"

Ron Eberly handed him a packet. Mitch lit a cigarette and let the calming smoke untie what was left of the strings. "Just at maximum Mach—right before burn-out—she seemed to start *hunting*. Real easy, though, just a hint of a loss of directional stability. But when I tried to damp it with rudder pressure she yawed, and almost got away. I can't understand what it was. It happened *after* re-entry too. Coming *and* going. Climbing *and* descending." He shivered. "Brother!"

Haskel gave him a searching look. "Did you go faster than the planned Mach number?"

"No, Lou," Mitch said testily. He took a long drag on his cigarette. "Do you suppose that black box did it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I didn't hit any higher Mach than on the last flight. That box is the only piece of weight that's been added. Supposing it shifted the plane's centre of gravity?"

Lou Haskel watched him with the special condescension of the engineer for the test pilot who tries to dabble in aeronautical theory. "Twenty-three pounds of instruments in a box didn't change your centre of gravity enough to make you yaw. Besides, why wouldn't you notice it at *any* speed? Why just at Mach six?"

"I don't know, Lou. You tell me. All I know is, when I'm flying six times as fast as sound I'm in a speed range that nobody knows anything about. How the blazes do I know that all the aerodynamic theories hold at four thousand miles an hour?"

* *Ed* Mach 6 is six times the speed of sound, so that we have Mach 2 equal to twice the speed of sound, and so on

Mitch saw Ron Eberly glance at him as if he had posed an interesting question.

"A physical law's a physical law," Lou Haskel said. "Could you have overcontrolled a little?"

"I don't know," Mitch said tiredly. "She just didn't seem like the same plane I flew on Flight Number Ten."

They slid up before the hangar, and walked into the cool gloom. They climbed to the first floor and started down the veranda running along the office spaces. Mitch stopped at the door labelled PILOTS' READY-ROOM.

Lou Haskel said, "Don't you want to get your report on tape?"

Mitch's eyes narrowed. "Look. This pressure suit is hot. What's more, it itches. Let's tape the debriefing session. O.K.?"

Lou nodded, and Mitch stepped into the locker-room. Stace Arnold sat in a deep chair by the window, leafing through the latest issue of *Aviation Week*. "How'd it go?" he asked.

Mitch began to dial the combination on his locker. His hands, he noticed, were still unsteady. "O.K., I guess."

"Sounded from here as if you had trouble."

Even the receiver in the flight office, apparently, had picked up Vickers's transmission. And Stace, evidently, had given up joining the group at the lake and was following the flights from the air-conditioned hangar. Vaguely irritated, Mitch yanked at the zip running from his throat to his crutch.

"Is it getting too hot for you out at the lake, Stace? Seems like you used to trot along and watch this operation."

Stace smiled. "I just finally got tired of waiting in the hot sun to see you bust your tail."

Mitch squirmed out of the suit. "You mean you're giving up the campaign to get this aeroplane away from me?"

"I was, but after what I heard on the radio I guess I'll stand by." Stace grinned, but he looked worried. "What happened, buddy?"

Mitch glanced at the mirror hanging in his locker. He had not shaved before the dawn take-off, and there was stubble on his jaw. His eyes were bloodshot from the glare. His short hair was flattened from the

lining of his pressure helmet. He saw in the mirror that Stace was watching him.

"Come on, Mitch, it wasn't bad enough to give you grey hair. What happened at 130,000 feet?"

Mitch hung his long cotton underwear in the locker and drew on pants. "I don't know. Just as I hit Mach six, going up, she started to yaw. For a second I thought I'd lose control. Coming down—same thing!"

Stace raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Lou seems to think it was *me*, overcontrolling." Mitch slipped into slacks and a sports shirt and started out of the door. "Have to go now, Stace. See you at the Pit."

Mitch moved along the veranda overlooking the hangar and entered the outer flight office. Already the group was forming round the conference table in Lou Haskell's cubicle. Haskell was working at his desk, under the massive date that one of the girls had painted on the back of a giant calendar sheet. The red letters and numerals, two feet high, read: THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 25.

Mitch glanced at the conference table. At the foot was a seat reserved for him; at his place was a tape recorder. Three or four engineers were seated already. "The guest of honour arriveth," said one.

Lou Haskell swung round. "I want to wait for Colonel Vickers. I called the Air Force side, and he's landed and on his way over.

"Oh?" said Mitch. "Why?"

"I just want to ask him what he saw."

Mitch raised his eyebrows, then wandered to the water cooler in the outer office. One of the secretaries flashed him a smile. She was a dark girl of perhaps twenty, with slanting brown eyes and a heart-shaped face. "Congratulations, Mr. Westerly," she said.

"Pardon me?"

She handed him a paper. "See? I check them off." On the sheet was a column of numbers from one to twenty. The first eleven were deleted by slanting pencil marks. "I type up the flight plans," she said.

"Say, that's a pretty important job."

"Don't tease me. Anyway, you're half-way through my list."

The secretary's perfume was the same Sue used. And this girl was as pretty as Sue, younger by several years, attractive in a piquant way. But like most beautiful women she wore her beauty as she wore a dress; Sue's loveliness radiated from some hidden vein of integrity.

Mitch missed her suddenly. After the briefing he might head for Los Angeles. . . . But no—Sue was scheduled for her Chicago flight this week-end. He looked again at the paper.

"Do you really think it'll take twenty flights to hit Mach eight? We *should* make it on the next hop."

The brunette looked relieved. "That solves my problem, then."

"What problem?"

"Today was Number Eleven. I was worried what to do with Number Thirteen. See? I left it out."

Laughter tickled his throat. "Why? Because it's unlucky?" She nodded. "O.K. I'll try to hit it before Flight Number Thirteen."

A round, intense young man headed for him across the office. Mitch recalled him as one of the company's public-relations people, never to be seen when grinding basic work was breaking hearts, but invariably swarming to a project when it approached its final days of glory. "Hello, Bobby," he said. "Haven't seen you since the X-Fr11."

"That's right, Mitch," said Bobby Knight. "I've been meaning to get up here, but we've been swamped."

Behind him was an angular man with dark curly hair and a hook nose. He wore a large visitor's pass on his blue suit. Bobby turned to him and said, "Here's your boy, Zeke. Mitch, this is Zeke Gresham. He's a writer from one of our biggest magazines."

Mitch shook hands, and Gresham's grip was solid. Bobby looked about. "Is there somewhere we can talk?"

Mitch said, "I doubt it. I have a debriefing in a couple of minutes. What did you want to know?"

Bobby sat on a desk. "Zeke is here to do a story on a test pilot. We've about convinced him that the Norco X-Fr18 is the hottest thing going."

Zeke spoke. "I'd like to do a detailed article on you, Mitch. Not as a typical test pilot—but as a man who's flying a plane—the plane—that's actually nibbling at manned space travel. I'd like to do it now, before

the final test flight. I'd like it to include your impressions of that flight. How does it sound?"

Mitch shrugged. Instinctively, however, he liked Gresham. "I'll have to think it over." He looked at Bobby. "How would the main office feel about it?"

Bobby smiled expansively. "Oh, we're pushing it. It's wonderful public relations. The Old Man's all for it."

"What about security?"

"Zeke's cleared for secret."

Mitch spotted Colonel Vickers entering the flight office, still in his sky-blue nylon G-suit.* "Well, we'll talk about it later. Where're you staying, Zeke?"

"At the Yucca Inn."

"I stay there myself. Why don't you meet me at the Pit this evening? It's the regular meeting of the TBBBFCSC. You might even meet a test pilot who'd be better for your article."

Zeke smiled. "I doubt that. What's the TBB—and the rest of it?"

Mitch moved towards the debriefing session. "It's the Tail Busters and Boulder Bouncers Flying Club of Southern California. Great group."

As Mitch passed the brunette secretary's desk, she looked up from the phone. "You have a call from Los Angeles, sir. It's a girl."

Mitch knew it was Sue. He picked up the phone and heard her voice, soft and bubbling with restrained joy. "How was the hop?"

"O.K., honey. What are you doing in L.A.? I thought you had a flight to Chicago."

"It's cancelled. I have a three-day lay-over. Was it a good hop?"

Mitch said, "Well . . . O.K." His mind worked swiftly. He would be going back to Los Angeles tomorrow, could see her tomorrow night. Yet all at once it seemed too long to wait. He licked his lips. Now why, suddenly, did he feel with Sue like a high-school boy asking a girl to a dance? He never had before. He tried to keep his voice light. "Sue?"

"Yes?"

* *Ed.* A G-suit is a tight-fitting garment encasing the lower part of the body from the lowest rib to the ankle, and specially designed to prevent blacking-out at high speeds.

"Can you come up?"

"Today?"

"Yes. We can drive back together tomorrow."

"I *could*, I guess. But why don't you come down?"

He would have, had it not been for the promise to the magazine writer. "I can't, Sue." He tried for flippancy. "The TBBBFCSC meets at six. Wine will flow for you like water. You can stay at Brock and Nita's. O.K.?"

She hesitated. "All right, Mitch. I'll be there about—oh, five, I guess."

"Pick me up at the Inn," he said, and replaced the phone.

The babble of voices round Haskel's conference table dropped as Mitch entered and took his seat. He adjusted the microphone, and then, ignoring the familiar printed form that Norco test pilots used in debriefing, he began to talk. As he spoke the flight came back vividly.

"The climb to forty thousand feet in the B-58 was normal. Nothing wrong with the mother ship, was there, Wally?"

Wally Marks, the pilot of the bomber which hauled him aloft on the X-Fr8's flights, shook his head. "No problem."

Mitch went on. "No suggestions for improving the cockpit comfort during the mother-ship phase . . ."

Apart from getting the pilot drunk, he thought, there is nothing that can be done about the long climb aloft in the four-jet B-58 Hustler, with your bowels tightening and the sweat coming out on your hands. You sit in your own plane in the cold bomb bay of the Hustler, helmet on, breathing its strange dry smell, dreading the moment of detachment from the mother ship. You have fourteen items to check before you report that you are ready for the drop. But they are automatic, and unfortunately they leave your mind free for fear.

"The count-down was normal. . . ."

Meaning that you are normally terrified as the flight engineer, sitting behind Wally, counts off first the minutes and then the seconds to drop time. Finally: *four, three, two, one* . . . Then you are falling down the dazzling shaft of light into the void.

"Drop was normal, and light-off was satisfactory."



On Flight Plan Number One, three months before, you were also terrified of flicking the switches that would awaken the rocket engines. On that flight you were afraid that somewhere in the system there might be a weak point; that some coupling or valve would burst under pressure at light-off and blast you and the ship into fiery nothingness. The system had held up, so *that* fear had been conquered. Though you still flinch when you start the engines, remembering the incredible force that will slam you ahead as each of them takes life, the terror of light-off is gone. But after today, as so often in testing, you will have a new fear to conquer—a dread that will return on the next flight when you approach the area of speed you approached this morning.

"O.K. I was able to stick to the planned trajectory, no problem."

Now, with the engines blasting sweetly, you are back with a practised technique. You pull up the nose, slicing through Mach two and the

thermal barrier in a split second, holding the speed at Mach five by climbing towards the thin, unresisting ionosphere. There is no fear, now; only concentration on the dials on the tiny panel. A swift glance at the altimeter shows 130,000 feet—twenty-four miles.

You're suddenly in the chemosphere, approaching what the aviation editors are beginning to call the "controllability barrier," waiting for burn-out and the queer, apparently never-to-be-familiar weightlessness. Still the mighty rockets pulse and the Machmeter climbs: 5.4, 5.6, 5.8, 5.9. Then, with forty rocket seconds left . . .

Mitch felt sweat break out on his forehead. "The powered phase was normal, up to a certain point."

There was a stirring among the engineers. Lou Haskell's ice-grey eyes regarded him from behind his glasses, almost accusingly.

"Just before burn-out, she started to yaw."

Could you tell them how a sudden, rolling swerve feels at four thousand miles per hour? Can you describe the terror that grips you when you know that if you have to eject, bail out, your clothes may explode in a sheet of flame from the friction of the air rushing past? Tell them that in what you imagine is your last instant you want suddenly to be in the arms of the woman you love?

"When she rolled, I tried to catch her with the rudder, but it didn't do any good. First she yawed to the left, and then to the right. I was about to shut off the rockets when normal burn-out occurred anyway. After three or four more swings, I got her nose-up to lose some speed and at about 5.8 Mach she settled down. But then after the free-flight phase, at about the same altitude—she yawed again."

Lou Haskell said, "How pronounced was it?"

"Enough to scare the hell out of me," said Mitch. "When I get what seems to be a loss of directional stability at Mach six, it doesn't take much to panic me."

"Specifically, how many degrees did you swing?" Haskell asked.

"For God's sake, Lou!" Mitch said incredulously.

"How many degrees?"

"Seven point six-two-eight," Mitch said dryly. "Give or take a thousandth of a degree."

Colonel Vickers laughed and Haskel fixed Mitch with a cold glance. "I'm just trying to find out the magnitude of this alleged loss of stability. Is that all right?"

Mitch sensed that these men, who had helped design and build the Big X, were united against him. The engineers felt that he was maligning their ship. He knew again the loneliness of the pilot surrounded by theorists.

George Vickers leaned back: "I trust that I was invited to this conference for a reason."

Haskel nodded. "I wanted to find out what you'd seen from the chase plane."

"Not a lot. Trying to keep that thing in sight is like tracking a bullet with a telescope. But I did see the yawing. For a few seconds it was quite evident. Then Mitch made a recovery. I would say that the recovery was very smooth."

Mitch was suddenly less lonely.

Haskel said, "Did it look as if he might have excited the yaw?"

"No. Why would he?"

"Tenseness, maybe. Overcontrolling to meet a situation that didn't quite exist."

There was a shocked silence round the table. Mitch felt the blood rise in his neck. He fought an impulse to walk out. "To the best of my knowledge," he said, "I didn't excite any yaw."

"O.K., Mitch." Haskel's brow furrowed. "But this is the same aeroplane you flew on Number Ten. It's nearly the same altitude and speed. Why the devil would you lose directional stability?"

Mitch studied his hands. "It *isn't* the same plane. Not quite."

Lou looked at him coldly. "If you're talking about that black box up forward, forget it. I told you it wouldn't change the centre of gravity enough to make any difference. Besides, if it did you'd have it at lower speeds, too."

"How do we know, Lou?"

"What do you mean? These are physical laws we're dealing with."

"They're physical laws, but the whole concept of this programme is to explore an area that no one's been in. A new area in speed, and a new

area in altitude. Maybe something happens up there to stability that doesn't happen anywhere else."

Lou smiled faintly. "What, for instance?"

"Look, I don't know. But until George Welch got killed, nobody ever told *me* you'd lose control around all three axes * pulling too many g's at high Mach. As far as I know, nobody ever heard of 'cross-coupling effect' until he got clobbered. Maybe this is the same sort of thing."

The new engineer, Ron Eberly, shot him a quick glance.

"What would you like us to do?" Lou Haskel asked.

"Return the plane to the way she was on Flight Plan Number Ten. I'll take another bite at a high Mach number, and we'll see if she does it again. It's that easy."

Lou flushed. "It's not that easy at all. To start with, that black box carries telemetering equipment essential to the value of the flight. As you know, it's sending data to the ground all the time you're in the air. Every time one of our satellites hits an extra ion up there, some big shot decides we'd better check the information in the Big X. So, if anything, we'll be adding more of this sort of gear."

"Lou, all I know is that this is an unexplored area we're dealing with. Up there I can practically hear the molecules of air hitting the canopy, there are so few of them." He tried to smile. "For all I know, I might be going sterile from the cosmic rays."

George Vickers drawled, "The least you could do is give him lead-lined pants."

The men laughed, and Mitch felt the tension ease. He grinned. "How about it, Lou? Take that weight out and give me one extra flight before the big final one."

Lou jerked his thumb towards the giant calendar page over his desk. "We can't, Mitch. We have to deliver this plane to the Air Force by September twenty-fifth. And it has to hit Mach eight before that. It takes two weeks to get her ready for a flight. Now, if you don't want to fly her"

* *Ed.* An aircraft has three axes—the longitudinal axis from the nose to the tail about which the aircraft can *roll*, the lateral axis from wing tip to wing up about which the aircraft can *pitch* and the normal or vertical axis about which the aircraft can *yaw*.

The words hung over the table like a mist. *You bastard*, thought Mitch. *You fat, self-satisfied bastard*. He picked up the blank flight-report forms and squared them up. "This is my baby. I'll fly it."

HE WALKED from the flight office with Colonel Vickers. Below, in the hangar bay, men were rolling in the Big X. The two pilots looked down at the incredibly slim, lance-like aircraft. Its queer tail, with surfaces protruding from the sleek skin like the feathers of an arrow, stamped it with a deadly purposefulness; its unbelievably tiny wings seemed almost an unnecessary concession to the past.

Seeing the X-F18 from a high angle, Mitch always had the eerie feeling that this plane, probably the last step before the true rocket ship of science fiction, could not possibly fly as an aeroplane flew, supported by its wings. But they did support it—or at least they did until the thrust from its rockets took over to hurl it like a projectile from an invisible gun.

The colonel was staring down at the graceful white craft. "You know, I never saw her from this angle before." He jerked his thumb towards the office. "I see why you take that guff. From here she looks like the next thing to a space ship."

Mitch nodded. "That's right," he said quietly. "The next thing."

LOU HASKEL held up a finger at Ron Eberly, motioning him to wait as the rest of the engineers filed out. When the office was cleared he swivelled his chair to his desk and found a file. "Eberly, you were in the Missiles Division down in the city?"

"Yes, sir. I spent a year as Abel Cartwright's assistant."

Haskel studied the 240 file. A graduate of the University of Washington in aeronautical engineering—a first-class degree—touchstone to engineering success; holder of a master's degree from California Institute of Technology. And unexplainably pulled here to Edwards Air Force Base from a part-time company scholarship at the University of California at Los Angeles within a month of a Ph.D. Why?

"Did you ask for this project?"

"No, Lou, I didn't."

Haskel tugged at his nose. "Most of you missile guys seem to think anything in air-frames is a step backward. How come they hauled you here, I wonder? I didn't request you. That's the first time anybody down there's done me a favour for a year."

He looked at the young engineer blankly. He was too junior, too young and inexperienced, to pose the remotest threat, in spite of his qualifications. Wasn't he? Lou felt the familiar irritation that he'd never had a chance, because of the baby and all, to get even a master's degree.

Ron said, "Well, Pete Nesbit called me up one day and asked if I'd like to come up here. I didn't, at first. But when he explained why, I got pretty enthusiastic. I thought he'd spoken to you, Lou."

The young man seemed distressed. He *could* be a spy, though his face looked simply too open for deceit. There had to be a reason, though. "What explanation did he give you?"

Eberly's voice dropped automatically, as everyone's did when they discussed the space-vehicle contract. "Well, I did my master's on stability," he said slowly. "And I've been working with high Mach controllability in missiles. This combination is supposed to help when we start the space-vehicle programme."

"If we get the contract," murmured Lou. The Eberly question still wasn't answered—Nesbit, who was chief of flight test, wasn't sending him a top-notch body like this out of friendship. Could he be grooming Eberly for project engineer on the vehicle contract? A twinge of alarm shot through him. "How old are you, Ron?"

"Twenty-eight."

The alarm subsided. He was too young. It would have to be something else. Someone in the Old Man's office might have run across Eberly's record and have come up with the idea to impress the Old Man. In that case, it might be wise to have Ron in his team. Lou smiled. "You going back to Los Angeles tonight, Ron?"

"If I can hop a company plane."

Lou looked at his watch. "The *Blue Beetle's* left. Tell you—I have a little more work to do. Wait for me at the Pit and I'll drive you down. I'm going home tonight anyway."

Ron thanked him. There was a knock at the door and a company messenger walked in, with a bill of lading. Lou signed it, tearing off a copy and passing it to Ron. "You know what that is?"

Ron shook his head. "One AN/ARP-26—Mod. three. No, I don't."

"Well, it's one of your missile black boxes. More telemetering for us. They told me it was coming."

"What does it sense?" Ron asked quickly.

Lou shrugged. "It was all in a memo—I forget. Ambient temperatures, beta and gamma radiation. You can read it if you want."

Eberly looked anxious. "How much does it weigh?"

"You thinking of Westerly's theory? About forty pounds, I think." Haskell smiled thinly. "Eighty thousand pounds of thrust ought to get it off the ground."

Eberly seemed troubled. "I just don't see why we're adding such equipment at this stage. Why wasn't this sort of telemetering designed into the plane?"

"Since this plane left the drawing-board," explained Haskell, "they've launched four more satellites. Every blamed one of them has opened up areas somebody wants to go into farther."

"But this aircraft is a refined instrument. We shouldn't overload it."

Haskell smiled distantly. "According to pilots, we always have. We're always hanging something extra on; every designer does. Ever since Orville Wright, who probably belly-ached at something Wilbur hung on for the first flight." He spread his hands. "What do you suggest? If we don't get the data, we don't take the next step."

"Well," Ron admitted, "if that plane *isn't* transmitting ambient temperatures, it might as well be sitting in the hangar, that's for sure. I just wonder what Mitch is going to say."

"I couldn't care less." Haskell swung back to his desk. "Well, I'll pick you up outside the Pit. About six thirty."

For a while after Eberly left Lou studied the cover of his file. Twenty-eight was too young for consideration on a project as massive as the space vehicle would be. And yet—wasn't there a project engineer on a Norco missile who was only twenty-eight? Eberly's salary was high, too: twelve thousand dollars a year. How long had he himself been

with the company before he made twelve thousand a year? About fifteen years. He only made twenty thousand now, as head of the hottest project in the company. What did Pete Nesbit make? A few years ago, when Pete had been appointed chief of flight test ahead of him, his promotion had been worth twenty-four thousand dollars. But it wasn't the money. . . . A man simply liked to get ahead; it was natural to want to have people look up to you.

Lou Haskel turned heavily and looked at the picture of his wife on his desk. She smiled warmly at him, a gaunt angular woman with a broad smile and buck teeth. He still remembered the first time he had introduced her to the Old Man—at a Management Club dance. What gauche remark had she made? "Oh, I've heard so much about you. Lou simply worships the ground you walk on." It had awakened him for months afterwards, the embarrassment. Yes, Mary was too warm and outgoing. With her cowl-like, awkward affection surrounding him like a moist fog, it was a complete miracle that he had got as far as he had. And yet, he supposed, he loved her.

There was a knock, and Vickie Lambert entered with the type-written draft of Mitch Westerly's tape-recorded report. When she left he read the report carefully, shaking his head when he reached the paragraph in which Mitch discussed the yaw. Pete Nesbit would read the report, and so would the Old Man. It was such a sloppy piece of thinking that he was tempted to ask Westerly to delete it. Or was there a better way to handle it? Why not simply add a dissenting opinion? Delicately shaded with just the right engineering irony? It might amuse the Old Man, who was certainly hard enough to reach nowadays.

He began to pace the room, turning over the ideas that occurred to him, smiling to himself. "With regard to the pilot's contention that—let's see—that twenty-three pounds of telemetering equipment placed at frame 124 caused enough—sufficient—change in the centre of gravity to induce almost uncontrollable yaw, the project engineer must differ. It is felt that some human element must have been introduced, and——"

Swiftly Lou sat down. Taking a sheet of paper, he began to write in a heavy scrawl. When he had finished, he called Vickie Lambert in "Type this to attach to Westerly's report. O.K.?"

She looked perturbed. "Will Monday be all right? It's after five."

"I guess so." Haskel tapped his teeth with a pencil. "You don't have to stick it on until *after* Westerly checks his final draft. He already knows how I feel about his theory."

Vickie looked at him strangely. "Whatever you say, sir."

Lou Haskel picked up his coat and followed her out. He thought of Mary, whom he hadn't seen since last week-end, a little hungry for her interest in everything he did; a little lonely and eager to bask in the warmth of her love. Tomorrow he might take her for a long drive to Palm Springs. He started down the hall, almost jauntily. Even if nobody gave a damn for either of them, he'd win through. But then he remembered there would be no ride to Palm Springs tomorrow—it was the last Sunday of the month, the only day that Mary could visit the baby. *Baby*, he thought. *At thirteen? God!*

He passed Brock Stevenson crossing the hangar floor. "Good night, Lou," said Brock. Lou hardly heard him. He stepped wordlessly into the copper sunlight.

CHAPTER 2

UE MORGAN swept her convertible up the gradient on the U.S. 6 to Soledad Pass. She would soon crest the San Gabriel Mountains and look down at the Mojave Desert. And in an hour she would be with Mitch. She was thoroughly happy, happier than she had been since the doctor confirmed her suspicion.

Already, over the rim of the mountains, she could see the familiar vapour trails slicing the blue. They were the only indication that she was about to enter the world's most active test-flying area. Their patterns were at one moment fluidly senseless and at second glance as lucid as the movements of a ballet. High above all the rest two invisible jets in mock battle wove a pattern that would hang for hours over the throbbing desert. Even now the design was tinged with pink by the afternoon sun. It was delicate and beautiful, framed by the Pass, and it brought on sentimental memories. The interlacing contrails were like the tracks of two expert skiers flying down a slope.

One bright Sunday almost a year before, she had sat resting in the porch of the ski lodge at Mammoth, and watched Mitch and Stace Arnold weave those same carelessly precise patterns as they swept down the slope. It had been the day she had fallen belatedly but irrevocably in love with Mitch, after she had known him for months, and she would forget not one instant of it. This pattern traced in the sky would always bring it back.

She had been sitting gnawing at a hamburger and marvelling at the grace and stamina of Mitch and Stace. Every fifteen minutes, in scarcely more time than it took the chair lift to swing them to the crest, they would reappear, swooping ecstatically into sight. Watching them, Sue wondered what elemental urge for motion set these men apart. In Mitch's style she sensed some mystic devotion to the laws of speed and momentum. He took breathless joy in the sport. He would be on the slope until dark. She sighed, sat back, and began to search the hill for the chubby boy in the red parka.

He was a dark, soft child of about nine, with a pudgy face and beautiful eyes. All morning, while Sue had skied the intermediate slope, he had ploughed through the soft snow, floundering up the run. He had long since relinquished the rope tow, because he seemed incapable of maintaining his balance on it. There was something heart-breaking in his determination. Sue had even tried to tutor him. His name was Hal. Hal had listened, tried, and flopped again.

Now she saw him once more, struggling by a stand of fir. He fell again. All at once, to her amazement, Mitch appeared beside him. He had broken off his run. Stace Arnold glanced back at him indifferently, and fell into line for the chair. Sue, for some reason interested, clamped on her skis and rode up to them. Mitch was talking. "O.K. You'll have to get up by yourself. Skis on the downhill side. That's it." He grinned at Sue. "Hi, Sue." The little boy grunted and swung erect. He tottered precariously on his skis for a moment, then caught his balance.

"Getting up is half the battle," Mitch said. "Now try to climb. Use that sideways, crab-way I told you. And, hey . . ." Mitch glanced at his watch. "I think after you make your run you ought to rest. When you're tired, you get hurt. O.K.?"

The boy nodded and clambered away up the hill. Sue regarded Mitch curiously. "Do you know him?"

"No. Do you?"

"No. I just wondered. . . . How did you decide to help *him*?" She pointed down the slope. "There are a dozen little kids floundering about down there. Plus," she added, "lots of pretty girls."

He removed some ice from a binding with his pole. "I don't know. Every time I'd go by, I'd see this character fighting it. He's soft outside, but he's tough inside." He smiled. "My time isn't really so valuable, you know," he added, and she realized that some of the inward glow she felt must be showing on her face.

They skied together, and then she lost sight of him. Later in the afternoon she discovered that he had gone back to the hotel without her.

She was his date, and she was a little piqued. She went back to the hotel with Brock and Nita Stevenson and Stace and Stace's girl. But it was all right . . . more than all right. Mitch was sitting in front of the fire in the lodge, talking to the little fat boy. Hal's ankle was bandaged, thoroughly sprained. "Hal hit an icy patch," Mitch explained. "We're waiting for his brother to come off the hill."

Hal's adoring eyes followed Mitch as he left to get her a drink. "He's a test pilot." The magnitude of the fact staggered his powers of communication. "He says . . . Well, you see, I build lots of model planes. And I thought I wanted to be a test pilot once, only my brother and dad, they said I'd be too fat. Well, Mitch says . . ." Hal gulped. "He says I'll get *over* that. He says the important thing is to do good at school. Arithmetic, science and all. He says there's no reason I *can't* be!"

Sue smiled down at him, a strange tightness in her throat. "And he knows, too," she said.

When Mitch returned, Hal was too overcome to talk further. When his elder brother arrived, they watched as the child hobbled to the door. "That little boy," Sue said, "would jump from the Empire State Building if you asked him."

Mitch looked down. "Poor little character. They brought him here, slapped skis on him and turned him loose. No lessons, no nothing. So he ruins his day."

"His day," Sue smiled, "was not ruined."

For hours then they had talked by the snapping fire; she could hardly remember what Nita and the rest did; to this day she didn't know whether they'd eaten dinner. But she could remember first noticing how expressive Mitch's rugged face could be as he spoke of space vehicles and satellites and man's eternal urge to tear the shrouds of earth and climb for the heavens; of Icarus flying too close to the sun and falling into the sea; of Shelley's *desire of the moth for the star* . . .

She realized as he talked that, in the months she had known him, she had somehow confused him with the garish background of hard-drinking test pilots and project personnel against which he moved; that he was something more than the others. And by the sighing embers, late that night, she realized that she had finally fallen in love. At the door to her room he brushed her lips with his, and looked into her eyes. "No," she murmured shakily. He left her and she closed the door. For a long while she stood in front of the mirror, studying her flushed face.

Before she went to bed she reached into her suit-case and found her wallet. She drew out the wedding photograph of Rod and herself, the picture that had been sent home with the other ridiculous remnants a boy could hang on to in Korea. She studied her picture for a long time. She was smiling at Rod, but it was the tolerant look of a girl undergraduate for her steady boy friend; almost a motherly expression.

She had been nineteen when the picture was taken. She was twenty-eight now, but the face in the mirror was younger than that in the photo. As she turned off the bedside light, she knew that she would have to tell Mitch about Rod.

There would be that to tell, and about the dog she had when she was four, and about the time at twelve she tried to join the WAVES.

There would be lots to tell him. . . .

THE COMPANY driver pulled under the portal of the Yucca Inn. Mitch thanked him. Passing from the blazing highway heat into the cool lobby, he crossed to an inner patio. A kidney-shaped swimming-pool danced in the sun, darting slivers of light at the surrounding varicoloured apartment doors. Round the pool, palms rustled.

Mitch crossed the court to the room he kept whenever flight operations were in progress. He stepped gratefully into the cool interior, stripped, and spent a limpid quarter of an hour under the shower. Finally he put on a bathrobe and flopped on to the bed, staring into the shuttered gloom.

Now that he was alone for the first time, he could think through the insane moment at 130,000 feet. Whatever was the technical reason for the yaw he would try to search out later, with help. What concerned him now was his emotional, personal reaction.

In the instant when the Big X had rebelled against his control, in the moment when all his faculties should have been focused on the present, Sue had somehow intruded. The normal diffuse physical fear of a man in danger had concentrated itself in one bolt of panic; a paralysing certainty that he would not see again the woman he loved; that she would never know that he loved her.

He turned over restlessly. Suppose he had crashed this morning. What would he have left her?

Nothing. Nothing but the memory of one rare night, months after that evening at Mammoth in front of the fire.

Would it always be like this for him? Would he be able to do without her during the easy parts, when there was no danger, only to call for her like a scared child when a new fear threatened?

That was how it had happened the first time, months before. The spectre of the first flight in the Big X had loomed closer and closer, and Mitch could remember himself now, as in a nightmare, passing through the days with a set smile plastered on his face, drinking too much, working too hard. And Sue had recognized it, not knowing what it was but sensing the strain.

"What is it, Mitch?" she asked two nights before Flight Number One. They were sitting alone by the grill on his patio at home while he tended their steaks. "You're preoccupied. There's something on your mind."

Tentatively, he jabbed a knife into the sirloin, checking the texture. "It's the aeroplane. It was the same way with the X-FII. New plane. . . ."

Her voice was strained. "Mitch, is there any real danger? I mean, this early?"

He was almost overwhelmed with a desire to protect her, but to lie would be stupid and unrealistic. "Of course."

"I mean, more than any other new plane? For the first few hops? You aren't doing anything *soon* that hasn't been done."

"That's right. Just like any prototype plane, for the first few hops." He served the steaks. "We know they'll fly, Sue; we're past the point where we test planes to find out if they'll stay aloft. The engineers tell you that, but for some reason it doesn't register until you fly it. This is temporary. But it's not preoccupation, honey" He cut a chunk from his steak. "It's fear."

She pressed his hand, grateful because he had told her. That night the need for her had been so great, their love so strong, that all her defences had crumbled.

But it had been their last night together, for in the morning, on the very brink of his proposing marriage, she had told him about Rod, and he had made his resolution not to let her face that ordeal a second time.

And now, when he was frightened again, he was calling for her, torturing them both.

Angrily he turned over, and drifted into restless slumber.

SUE STOPPED at Brock and Nita Stevenson's ranch-style home, left her bag and drove to the Yucca Inn. The clerk gave her Mitch's room number, and she crossed the patio, tapped gently on the door and tried the knob. It was open, and she slipped into the darkness.

Mitch was sprawled on the bed, breathing evenly, and when her eyes adapted to the gloom she read a faint unhappiness on his face. She glanced at the clock on his dressing-table; it was barely past five. She sat quietly in an easy chair and studied his face, wanting to take him in her arms and erase the troubled lines, but knowing that after the morning's flight he needed rest.

And, she reflected wryly, she didn't even know whether he would accept her love. Since the morning after that impossibly, frighteningly beautiful night, he had hardly touched her. At first she had accepted his

restraint gladly; one night together, with the love she bore him, she had justified to her conscience; she doubted that she could rationalize more. But, she thought ruefully, she hadn't had to. What had happened?

It had been the shadow of Rod, somehow, incredibly falling across the breakfast table that morning. Mitch was talking about his ex-wife. "You cook eggs," he said, "just like she did. When she'd bother to get up."

"Is that good? From what you've said, it sounds like an insult."

"No. It's amazing," he admitted, "but, as artificial as she was, she was a good cook. And she had very little practice."

She had suddenly felt that this was the time to tell him, with the morning sunlight sparkling on the serving bar he used for a table. Had it been some sort of premonition that had made her wait so long? "I've had practice," she said "I was married too, you know."

"That so?" Mitch said. "Pass some coffee, honey. When was that?"

"Almost nine years ago. It didn't last long."

"The guy must have been an idiot, to let you get away."

"No, it wasn't that. He was killed in Korea."

She had been about to tell him something of Rod, of his strange, withdrawn moods, of his childishness and need for her love. But Mitch was staring at her bleakly.

"He was *killed*? Kind of rough. How old were you? Nineteen?"

"Almost twenty."

Mitch stirred his coffee. "Did you love him very much?"

Sue considered. She had certainly loved Rod, or she would not have married him. But her feeling for him had been a warm, protective thing; she could not remember anything like the searing flame that burnt within her for Mitch. Just the same, loyalty to Rod's blurred memory made her blurt, "Of course I loved him."

"It must have been hell, losing him."

Real pain shone in his face. Her throat tightened. "Lots of girls went through it, Mitch."

"Death shouldn't have happened to you," Mitch said angrily. "You're too sensitive."

"It happened," she said, "to him. Not me."

"It's easier to die than to lose someone you love," Mitch insisted. "It shouldn't have happened to you."

And afterwards he had been withdrawn, even cold. For weeks he had not called, and when they did go out it was as it had been before Mammoth. Until this morning, when there had been real longing in his voice.

She sensed somehow that he loved her. Why couldn't he say it? Could he be jealous of Rod? But deep within her she knew it could not be jealousy of a ghost; Mitch was too mature for that.

He tossed an arm over his eyes and groaned. She knelt by the bed. His eyes flicked open. "Sue? When'd you get here?"

"Just now. You were dreaming."

He shook his head as if to clear it. He grinned. "You're a beautiful girl, Sue. Did I ever tell you?"

She was afraid to trust her voice. He cradled her face in his hands and kissed her, gently but with insistence. An almost unbearable joy stilled the worry and turmoil she had felt for weeks. "I was so scared for you this morning," she whispered. "So scared . . ."

He sat up suddenly. "Honey, how about a drink?"

He poured two Scotch-and-sodas. She sipped hers. "What is it, Mitch? You're moody again."

Was it only his preoccupation with the Big X that shadowed their happiness? If it was only that, she could go on with the childish deception she had practised to still her conscience, that she was really married to Mitch, that they were like two lovers in mortal danger, perhaps on a desert island; that ordinary morality could not apply.

"Mitch, is it the plane?"

"The plane's all right."

"How was the flight? Tell me about it."

Mitch shrugged. "Same as Number Ten, just about."

"No trouble?" She flicked him a sideways glance.

"Well—nothing to speak of. I got a little yawning I hadn't noticed before, and had a fight with the engineers about what might be causing it."

"Who won?"

"The fight? Lou Haskel."

"You're flying the aeroplane. I'd think they'd listen to you."

"They're supposed to know more about what makes it fly." He sipped his drink. "Anyway, we're doing it their way."

"I don't see why you have to."

"When it's my tail, you mean? Well, I could threaten not to fly it. But as you know I have an understudy waiting in the wings."

"Stace?"

Mitch nodded. "He might be my best buddy, but he'd be into that bird like he owned it if I turned my back for two minutes."

"What about his wedding? His honeymoon?"

"It wouldn't stop him a second. He'd fly it on his wedding night."

She looked at him speculatively. "You feel the same way, don't you?"

"About marriage?"

Mitch walked to the window and looked out at the pool. Somewhere over the desert a pilot pulled his plane from a dive and the shock wave rolled across the country like a clap of thunder. The boom rattled the window and made Mitch's drink dance to the edge of the table. He snatched it before it could fall. He turned to face her, dreading what he must say. But at least it was the truth

"This flight comes first, Sue."

MITCH AND SUE threaded through the tables at the Pit towards a raucous table at the back. Stace Arnold looked up. "Here's our hero."

Mitch introduced Sue to Zeke Gresham and Bobby Knight. Someone pulled up two extra chairs and she squeezed in next to the writer. Mitch sat opposite her, next to Arnold. Stace waved a Martini at Zeke. "Mitch, this gentleman tells me that he's going to use you in an exposé of test pilots. Suppose he prints the truth?"

Mitch ordered drinks. "You couldn't send the magazine through the mails."

Sue caught a gleam of amusement in Zeke's eyes, and a hint of curiosity as he looked at Mitch. She asked him, "Are you really going to do his story?"

"If he'll let me."



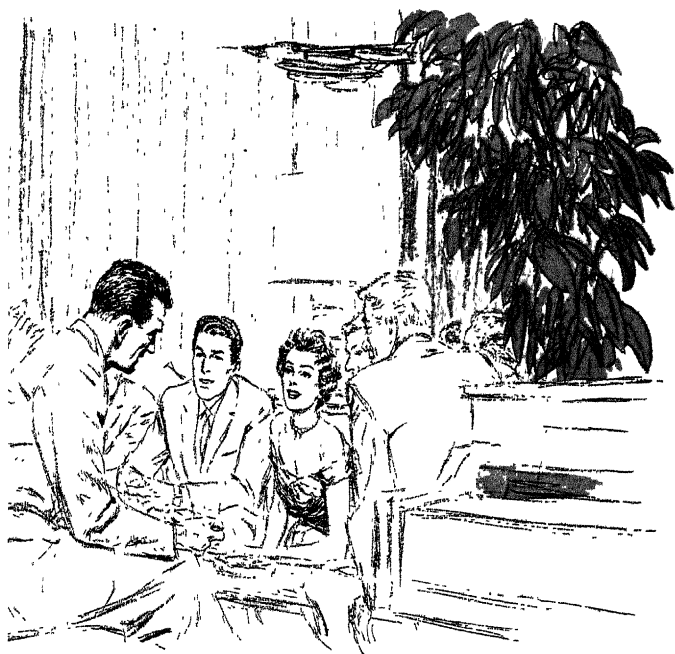
"You picked the right man. He lives to fly."

"You think he's pretty special?"

She sighed. "He's special, all right."

"In what way?"

How could she tell a stranger what Mitch was? And yet she found that she could tell this man. She said quietly, "He's not like the rest, Mr. Gresham. He's so soft in some ways. . . . He can't bear to see anyone in trouble, or hurt. Anyone, or *anything*. A few months ago they had a banquet at the SETP—that's the Society of Experimental Test Pilots. Mitch was going to give a talk on space flight. He'd spent almost



a month working up his paper, and all the big shots in the aviation industry were going to be there."

She looked at Zeke. He seemed interested. "Go ahead."

"When he and Brock left for L.A. it was dark and the car ahead hit a police dog, knocked it off the road and kept going. They heard the dog yelping away through the sagebrush. Well, Mitch made Brock help him try to find the poor thing for almost an hour. Then he made him go for the sheriff, while he looked some more. He finally caught it, too, and held it while the sheriff put it away."

"What about the speech?" Zeke asked.

"Put yourself in the place of the procurement people. They can give the next contract to us, or to some other company. Then suppose the vehicle fizzles. If *we* make it and it fizzles, at least everybody thinks that the best designers built it. But suppose somebody *else* does it and it fizzles. Five million Monday-morning half-backs who read Gresham's article are screaming for Pentagon blood."

In the noisy bar, Mitch sorted out his thoughts. It was possible that Knight had guessed how much the vehicle contract meant to him, and only used it as a lever. On the other hand, he could be right. Finally he looked up. "O.K., Bobby. I'll buy it."

Knight beamed and looked across the table at Zeke. "Zeke," he said happily, "Mitch has just bought the package."

Mitch saw the dark, angular face across the table light up. Gresham's black eyes met his. "Good," he said quietly. "I'll do my best on it."

THERE WERE several more rounds of drinks, and the party became a rollicking celebration of Flight Number Eleven of the X-Fr8, of Stace's coming wedding, of all the flights and weddings to come. Someone began an Air Force song, and others joined in, and a mist of smoke separated the corner from the rest of the room. At one point Mitch saw Ron Eberly's gaunt figure leaning against the bar. He walked over and put his hand on Ron's shoulder. "Why don't you join us, Ron?"

The engineer glanced at the table at the back. "I don't know, Mitch. I'm leaving for L.A. with Lou Haskell in a minute."

Mitch ordered Ron another beer and then faced him squarely. "You have any idea what happened this morning, Ron?"

Ron stared into his glass. "The instability? No, Mitch, I don't. I'm just a new boy, though—I'm sure Lou Haskell and the brass down in the city will work it out."

"I'm not so sure. They designed her, and they simply won't face the fact that she might not do what they think she can do." He drummed his fingers on the bar. "I *still* feel that it's that black box."

"You *feel* it?"

"Yes. I can't explain it, but when she started to swing this morning it was just as if it all started there."

"Theoretically, so little weight in that position *couldn't* make you lose stability. I ran a quick check. The figures seem O.K."

Mitch found his hands gripping the bar. "Maybe figures aren't enough. Look, you drive a car. Have you ever felt something wrong with your steering mechanism, and had a mechanic tell you that everything was all right, and still known that it was wrong? And then finally found a mechanic who discovered a wheel out of line?"

"No, but I see what you mean."

Mitch frowned thoughtfully. "Our formulas are made up for conditions that we know about now. Three or four thousand miles per hour and twenty miles altitude are a new area. Do all the old laws have to hold?"

Ron considered the question. "No, Mitch, they don't. I'm going to work on it. I'll have to, because" His voice trailed off.

Mitch searched his face. "Because why?" Eberly shook his head. "Look, Ron, they're not planning on adding any *more* weight to that plane?"

Ron looked miserable. "Maybe not, Mitch. I hope they don't." He glanced at his watch and said, "Mitch, I have to go. I'll see you Monday or Tuesday, right?" Then he was gone in the crowd.

Mitch was suddenly tired—tired and inexplicably lonely. He went back to the table and sat down heavily. A hand lightly touched his arm and he turned.

The pretty brunette secretary from the flight office looked down at him. Behind her stood an Air Force lieutenant. Mitch stood up clumsily. "Hello," he said, and stopped, realizing that he did not know the girl's name.

She smiled. "Mr. Westerly, I'm a name-dropper, and when I said I knew you, Joe asked me to introduce him. Mitch Westerly, this is Lieutenant Adams—Joe Adams. See, Joe? I'm caught. He doesn't even know my name."

Joe shook hands. "I wanted to congratulate you on today's flight, Mr. Westerly. I saw you land."

Mitch waved at the table. "Sit down."

The lieutenant shook his head. "No thanks. Just wanted to say hello."

The girl smiled. "Mitch, I hate to talk business, but I thought you ought to know Lou Haskel's adding an opinion on your report before he sends it to the city."

Mitch raised his eyebrows. Then he shrugged. "Well, that's his prerogative. I couldn't care less."

"I thought not. And Mitch—next time, so you'll know, my name is Vickie. Vickie Lambert." She moved off with the lieutenant.

Mitch felt weary. He glanced at Sue across the table. She was watching him with amusement. "Mitch! Are you getting old?"

"Why?"

Sue said, "That's the prettiest girl in the place. And you practically went to sleep in her face."

The room was all at once unbearably smoky. Mitch rose. "Sue, let's shove off." He shook hands with Zeke Gresham and gave him his Los Angeles address. "I'll be home for three days. If you'd like to drop in we can start on your project."

They threaded their way through the crowd and stepped into the desert night, chill and clear.

CHAPTER 3

THE HOUSE Mitch shared with Stace clung to the hillside like an alpinist, and from the living-room the view of the sprawling city in the Los Angeles basin was a startling thing. Sue, on her way to the patio in a swimming suit, paused for a moment and gazed at the infinite metropolis stretching from the Hollywood Hills to the bay of Santa Monica. Then, when she heard the "chung . . . chung . . ." of the diving board at the back, she moved through the sliding glass doors.

Mitch lay in his trunks, eyes closed, while Stace Arnold dived into the tiny pool. Sue flopped beside Mitch and began to massage the banded cords of his back muscles.

"I used to massage my dad's neck," she said. "You're built like him. But he's handsomer."

"Your dad's handsome?"

"He is a very ornamental man, even now. I used to wonder how

Mother hung on to him, until I discovered that she was the prettiest woman in town."

"How come they had such a plain daughter?"

"I've often wondered," Sue said.

He lay back, looking up at her. His voice was low. "Nobody is more beautiful than you, Sue. Nobody."

When he spoke seriously, he could make her heart race. Hastily she said, "Would you like to meet them, Mitch? My family?"

"Well," he hesitated. "Are they coming out?"

"No. But at Christmas I'm flying back. We have a wonderful time at Christmas. My sister will be there, and Chuck—the kid brother who's at the University now. Could you go back with me, Mitch?" Perhaps by Christmas they'd be married. Really married, and not just in her heart. . . .

"Well," Mitch said, "Christmas is still a long while off." He was on his feet in a quick movement, towering over her. He reached down a hand. "Let's torpedo Stace."

"On his wedding day?"

"There is no place for sentiment in battle," he said, pulling her to her feet. "We're a wolf pack and this is war. . . ."

Inside the house a phone jangled. "Armistice," said Mitch, padding inside. Sue dropped back to the cement. Stace climbed out.

"Are you excited, Stace?" she asked.

He mulled over the question. "Yes. Of course. After all, you don't get married every day."

Sue flicked a piece of nail polish from her thumb. "You know," she said, "the other night Mitch told me that you wanted to fly the Big X so much you'd fly it on your wedding night." She turned and looked at him. "Why?"

Stace grinned. "I don't know. Anybody would. This is the glory flight of the year. That's why I screamed until they let me understudy Mitch." He blew at an ant scurrying on the concrete. "I'll bet they're glad they let me check out in it, by now."

"Why?"

"Because they're playing me against him. Can't you tell? If I weren't

checked out, he'd tell them to go to the devil until they found out what caused that thing on Saturday. With me lurking in the background, he's scared to death he'll lose the project."

Sue stared at him incredulously. "I think that's terrible. You're his best friend, aren't you?"

"I guess so. What's that got to do with it?"

"I should think a lot."

"Look at it this way. If fundamentally he doesn't trust the plane, maybe it would be better if I did fly it."

"Why should you trust it if he doesn't? He must have twice your experience in the air."

Stace nodded. "That's right. But he's a sort of a 'seat-of-the-pants' pilot, Sue. Not entirely, maybe—nobody is any more. But he tends to trust his *feel* more than his instruments." He grinned at her. "Make no mistake, kid. I'm sitting on the side-lines hoping he'll blow his top at them and they'll send me in. Nothing personal, just a matter of ambition."

She sat up. "Stace," she said hotly, "you're letting them use you to force him into a flight that he doesn't think is safe!"

"If he doesn't *really* think it's safe, he won't fly it. Anyway, what can I do?"

"I think," Sue said, "you could tell them that if *he* won't fly it until they see to whatever it is, *you* won't fly it either. That's what I think."

"Listen, Sue, in this racket you just don't go on strike, not with the Russians so eager for land on the moon. I'm an engineer myself. I think the plane is safe because the weight and balance charts say it is. If Mitch doesn't, that's his problem."

They heard Mitch yell from within the house, "Stace! Answer the door, will you? I'm on the phone."

Through angry tears, Sue watched Stace as he crossed the patio, hating his assurance, his glossy sheen of competence. Then he stopped, turned and came back. "Sue. Believe me, it wouldn't make any difference. He'd know I was doing it for him, and he'd fly anyway."

Sue realized suddenly that she was crying. "Well," she choked, "try it and see."

He shook his head sadly. "No, Sue. Sorry." Then he moved towards the house again.

For a long while she lay in the sun, letting the knot in her throat untie itself. She heard footsteps and looked up. Zeke Gresham stood over her, his pale New York face a little incongruous above a wild sports shirt. She sat up. "Hi," she said, brightening.

"Hello, Sue." He was carrying a miniature tape recorder. "All ready to begin work."

"He'll be out in a minute."

His eyes swept the patio. "Beautiful," he said warmly. "Coming through that pine-panelled living-room, with the big bay window, I wondered why I'd ever settled in New York."

"It is nice," Sue agreed. "And at night you see all Los Angeles spread before you as if someone had spilt a jewel box."

"I'll bet," Zeke said. He turned. "Hello, Mitch."

Mitch was apologetic. "Say, Zeke, I'm awfully sorry. I've just got a call from the plant. I have to go—it's very important. I wonder if tonight—"

"Tonight," Sue reminded him, "is your best friend's wedding. You're going to be best man. Remember?"

Mitch grimaced. "Lord! Don't tell Marilyn I forgot. Zeke, I guess we'll have to put it off until tomorrow."

"Mitch, at least get Stace to invite him to the wedding."

"Of course," Mitch said. "Half the test pilots in town will be there—maybe it will give you some background. Now I have to go."

Something in his face, some shadowed concern, chilled Sue. "Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? No, I don't think so. Somebody just needs a little straightening out."

They watched him walk across the patio. "You probably know more about Mitch than he does himself," Zeke said. "I'll interview you. How long have you known him?"

"A little over a year. I met him when I was stewardess on a flight from Chicago to Los Angeles. He was flying back from delivering a jet to the Air Force at Dayton."

Zeke raised his eyebrows. "I didn't know you were a stewardess."

"Yes. He asked me to a party that night, and we've been going together ever since. But at first it was sort of one-sided—I never went out with men much, but he still went out with other girls. He used to be quite a lad."

"Is he going to marry you some day?"

"I . . . I don't know. I think so. Something keeps getting between us. I think it's the flight."

"He was married before, wasn't he? To a New York actress, or a model, or somebody?"

Sue nodded. "She apparently cured Mitch of marriage. She hated the West, and he wasn't about to quit test flying, so—*kaput!* Are you married, Zeke?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Almost, once, to an English girl in London. She was killed."

Sue looked into the sensitive face. "I'm sorry."

Zeke smiled. "It was a long time ago. I just haven't found the right girl again."

"You will," said Sue.

Zeke moved suddenly. "I think I'd better go, Sue. Thanks so much for the talk."

"Are you coming to the wedding?"

"I'd like to."

She gave him the address, went to the door with him and watched him walk loosely down the drive to a hired car.

THE GUARD at the Norco Administrative Building saluted him with deference. "Hi, Mr. Westerly. Back from Palmdale?"

Mitch nodded. He started down the long corridors, first past the Old Man's outer office, regal with fine leather, thick carpets and gleaming models of Norco planes. Still in "Rug Row," he passed suites of the vice-presidents, division heads, and finally the less pretentious sanctuaries of special assistants and bright young executives. Then came cavernous rooms full of draughtsmen and engineers, boundless, impersonal spaces lit by fluorescent lamps high in the ceiling. He crossed

one of these spaces to a door marked FLIGHT TEST DIVISION: RESTRICTED AREA. He opened the door, smiled at a guard inside, and crossed the room. Brock Stevenson, weathered from the desert sun, sat behind the desk.

"What's up, Brock? Is it what I think it is?"

Brock nodded tiredly. "They're working on the Big X now. I bolted over here to let you know. I reckoned you might need some support if you wanted to talk to the Chief."

"Thanks. I do want to talk to him. How much are they adding?"

"It's about forty pounds, at station 124."

"Brother! They didn't pay any attention to me at all, did they?"

"No. You're just the pilot." Brock, who had flown with Mitch from a carrier in the Pacific, quoted their old skipper bitterly: "'Hang one more bomb on that Hell-diver—we've got another three knots of wind across the deck.'"

"I remember," said Mitch. "Well, let's go and see Nesbit."

Mitch led the way through a large draughting-room into a space humming and clicking with the activity of a huge computing machine. Leaning over a table at the end of the room were Ron Eberly and Pete Nesbit, the young chief of flight test. They straightened as Mitch arrived.

"We've been looking over the data on your film, Mitch," said Nesbit, a diminutive ex-pilot with a fair crew-cut.

Mitch nodded. "What did you find?"

Nesbit looked at him speculatively. "Frankly, Mitch, it looks as if you excited that yaw yourself."

Mitch glanced at the bits of motion-picture film on the table. "I just can't believe it. I handled that thing like a baby."

Nesbit picked up a piece of film. "This indicates that, just before the first swing, you induced rudder movement."

"How do you know it wasn't a normal control movement to keep it on course?" Brock asked.

"We don't. But right after that, she started to yaw." Nesbit cleared his throat. "Your report says you think it's because we added some weight forward. Aerodynamically, it doesn't make sense."

"All right. Maybe I induced it, and maybe I didn't. But that isn't what I'm here for. What's this about adding *another* forty pounds?"

"It's telemetering equipment, to tell us something that we have to know. That's all."

"Suppose I'm right and you're wrong? After all, I'm the Joe that's flying the plane."

"That's certainly true," said Pete thoughtfully, "and we wouldn't want anyone who didn't have confidence in it to fly it."

Mitch flared. "Look, if you're thinking of having Stace Arnold replace me, it will take another five hops to check him out well enough to try for Mach eight."

"I wouldn't think so," Pete said. "He's already checked out at slower speeds." He looked uncomfortable. "Listen, Mitch, let's talk frankly. Come into my office and get a cup of coffee."

The four men moved to Pete's office, and he rang for coffee. Then he sat back behind his desk. "O.K. The pressure on this project is tremendous. We simply have to complete the programme by September twenty-fifth. Because"—his voice dropped—"that's all the time we have before we bid for the contract for the space vehicle."

Mitch felt a chill race up his back. "Brother! I had no idea it was that close."

"That's it. O.K. One, we have to be able to show them a Mach-eight run. Two, we have to obtain the data that we contracted to obtain. If we don't, it's ammunition for the competition. Why give us the space-vehicle contract if we can't even produce a plane that'll give us the information we need to build a manned satellite?"

He sipped his coffee gingerly. "On the other hand, if we do make it, I honestly think that we'll win the space-vehicle contract." His eyes held Mitch's. "While I'm not authorized to make any promises, it would seem logical to me that if you're the guy who hits Mach eight, you'll have first crack at the vehicle when it's built." He turned quizzical. "If you want it."

Now that the offer was made, there was a long silence. Pete spoke again. "Do you?"

"Isn't it a little early for a decision?"

"Frankly, I think you made the decision a long time ago. Am I right?"

Mitch looked up slowly. "You're right," he said. "But that has nothing to do with whatever's wrong with the Big X. I'm not going to be riding the space vehicle if I'm not alive to do it." He took a deep breath. "I either get one more hop at Mach six to check that excess weight, or we take out the excess weight and I try for Mach eight. That's the way it has to be."

Nesbit's eyes narrowed. "Mitch, there simply isn't time to prepare the ship for two hops. We can't let you do it."

Well, thought Mitch, there it was, black and white, take it or leave it. He remembered that horrible instant when the Big X had turned on him. And then he thought of the yawning void beckoning its first conqueror; the silent reaches yearning for the first manned satellite. A deep, fantastic dream, held fiercely since childhood, was, incredibly, within reach. He must make a choice, he thought angrily, all because of a few days on a calendar pad.

The eyes of the three men were on him. Then Brock spoke softly. "I've got an idea."

"Shoot," said Pete.

Brock began to pace. "I'm not certain—but it's just possible that we might be able to get the Big X ready by a week from *this* Thursday. If we can do that, we can fly her once and still have her ready for the final hop in another two weeks."

Pete said flatly, "You can't do it. There's not enough time. Company policy says strip her completely between flights—and that's what we're going to do."

"We can if we work three shifts," Brock insisted.

A spark of hope danced in Mitch's chest.

Pete shook his head. "That's unrealistic, Brock. You can't work the men for ten solid days!"

"Suppose you let me worry about that? Those guys will do anything for that plane."

"It'd cost dough," Pete said tentatively.

"It's not going to cost one thousandth the money it would cost if Mitch is right," Brock said.

"How are we going to justify it to the Air Force? The next flight is supposed to be for Mach eight."

Mitch said, "Look, I don't know if Brock can swing it or not. If he can, I'll compromise to justify the extra hop. I'll carry the excess weight, and I'll try for Mach seven. It's a step ahead, if the Air Force complains. If it gets too rough to handle, I'll cut my rockets and jettison the fuel."

Pete Nesbit stared for a long time at his desk. "All right," he said suddenly. "Go to it, Brock. And good luck." He swung his gaze to Mitch. "Remember, we make Mach eight by the twenty-fifth. And we have that telemetering gear on board. Now, are you going to fly *that* hop? Definitely?"

Mitch stood in thought. Finally, he said, "I'll fly it. Give me the extra hop, and I'll fly it." His voice was hollow in his ears.

Mitch stood alone behind the bar in his living-room, dressed in a dark blue suit, mixing a drink for himself and Stace. In the kitchen he could hear Kato, their occasional party butler who was catering for the reception, bellowing in anglicized Japanese. An Oriental adolescent in a white coat, presumably Kato's eldest son, rocketed from the pantry door, heading for the front entrance. "Old man was gonna kill me," he chortled. "I forgot the anchovies."

Stace appeared at the upstairs landing, starting down in his shirt-sleeves. He spotted the drinks, crossed the room and downed half his glass at a gulp. Mitch raised his eyebrows. "Buddy, you want me to have to carry you to the altar? Like a pagan sacrifice? Honest, now, Stace, you have to stay sober."

Stace took another sip of the drink, ignoring him. "Why'd you break up with her? Your wife."

"I didn't exactly. She divorced me."

Stace waved his hand impatiently. "What happened?"

"She couldn't stand the test flights. And I wouldn't give up flying."

"I thought it was because she wouldn't come West with you."

"That was part of it. She decided that if I got killed she'd better have her career. And then there was an argument about a baby."

"A baby?"

Mitch flopped into an arm-chair. "That's right. I wanted a kid—always did. She couldn't swallow the idea of bringing one up alone when they scraped me off a rock somewhere." He lit a cigarette. "And I'll tell you something, Stace. She was right. She was shallow, and artificial, but she was human, and she was right."

"Why'd you marry her? You knew the score."

"That was before the X series. And I was younger."

"O.K., Pop."

"I can't do it again," Mitch murmured. "Not to Sue . . ."

"Hmm?"

"Skip it." Mitch got up.

"I heard you. You think I'm not being fair to Marilyn?"

"Simmer down, Stace. I'm sorry. Marilyn's a wonderful girl. She'll make you happy."

Stace moved to the window. "She'll just have to take her chances, that's all," he muttered. He turned back to the room, more tense than Mitch had ever seen him. "I just wish I knew her better."

IN THE minister's room, Marilyn was trying to apply lipstick to a trembling lip. Sue, beside her, spoke. "Marilyn, let me do it."

Marilyn shook her head. "It's silly. The last time I had the shakes was when my father made me ride some silly pony at an amusement park in Tallahassee. Isn't it ridiculous?"

"I don't think so. It's the most exciting day in a girl's life. I guess you can shake if you want to."

Marilyn finished her face. "How's that?"

"You're . . . ravishing, Marilyn. I really mean it."

Tears came into the younger girl's eyes. "I wish he could be here. If he could *only* be here. He'd love Stace."

"Who, Marilyn?"

"My daddy." She took a long breath, obviously fighting tears. "I remember that day at the fair, when he saw that I was shaking, he climbed on to the horse himself and helped me." She rambled on. "He was a school-teacher, you know, up North. He only went to Florida for his health. It didn't do any good. . . ."

The two girls heard the organ begin "I Love You Truly." Marilyn tensed. There was a tap at the door. Sue opened it and the minister stood before them. He smiled at Marilyn. "There's a mighty impatient young man waiting for you at the altar."

Sue took Marilyn's hand and squeezed it as they left the room.

THERE HAD been one rehearsal a week before, but Mitch had ducked out of it. Now, as the familiar ritual was repeated in front of the hushed congregation, Sue glanced anxiously at him. *Please, God, don't let him miss the only cue he has.* The point at which he was to give Stace the ring was rushing, rushing, rushing. Now Marilyn was repeating it tremulously: ". . . according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth. . . ." There was an expectant hush. Still Mitch, opposite Sue, stood placidly. *You idiot, the ring,* she shouted silently *Please, please . . .* Someone coughed and Mitch woke up suddenly. His hand dived into his pocket. Suddenly the ring dropped and rolled towards the minister. "Damn it," Mitch said involuntarily. Stace, stony-faced, scooped up the ring and placed it on Marilyn's finger. The whole incident had taken only a second—perhaps those in the pews had hardly noticed or heard—and yet Sue felt the blood surge to her face. Then the minister said briskly, "*I pronounce that they be Man and Wife,*" and Stace enfolded Marilyn in his arms.

Sue walked down the aisle, with Mitch beside her. In the vestibule of the church a line of tanned flight personnel intermingled with paler men from the Wilshire Boulevard store in which Marilyn modelled, waiting for the kiss from the bride. Sue turned to Mitch. "Oh, Mitch," she murmured. "How could you?"

Mitch shook his head. "I'm sorry, honey. You think anybody heard?"

"Of course they did."

Sparky Lewis, an old friend of Mitch's pressed through the crowd. He glanced at Mitch humorously. "Mitch, you were great. I knew they should have given you a speaking part." He grinned at Sue. "When a guy's got a streak of ham in him——"

"Oh, shut up, Sparky," Sue said irritably.

Sparky winked at her and passed on. Sue heard a low voice at her

side. "Hi." She looked up at Zeke Gresham. "Hello, Zeke." She smiled. "What did you think of the wedding?"

"I liked it." He hesitated. "I guess I'm the only man in the world who likes weddings. There's something so predictable about them."

"Not this one," Sue said grimly. "When you write your article, you'd better say something about this character's reflexes."

"Hey!" Mitch said suddenly. "We're supposed to be at the honeymoon car." They raced down the church steps and opened the door to Stace's Thunderbird coupé. The bride and bridegroom ran down the steps in a self-conscious sprinkle of rice.

"Now, Stace," warned Mitch, "no skipping the reception."

Stace laughed. "How did you guess? O.K., we'll drop in. But I'm not staying long." He grinned at Marilyn. Sue saw the girl smile back, but her lip was trembling. The Thunderbird drew away from the kerb with a throb of harnessed power.

MITCH ROCKETED his little MG up the familiar twisting drive. Already there was a line of cars parked outside, but he shot expertly between two gleaming saloons and cut the engine. He helped Sue out of the car and they moved up the path into a sea of sound. The radio was blasting and Sparky Lewis was torturing a piano in a hopeless attempt to capture a distracted blonde. Somehow, Mitch could perceive, Kato had in an incredibly short time decimated the ranks of the sober with champagne and his notorious Martins. "Well, since we can't beat it, I guess we'd better join it," Mitch said. "There's Stace."

Sue nodded. "I'll find Marilyn."

Mitch moved to the bar, presided over by a perspiring and happy Kato. Stace turned from his conversation with Mel Kalart. Kalart was the project engineer on the new Norco auto-pilot which Stace was testing.

"Anyway, Mel," Stace was saying, "let me buy you a drink." He set two champagne glasses on the bar and Kato filled them. He glanced at Mitch. "You know what this idiot has asked me to do?"

"Nothing an engineer asks a pilot surprises me any more."

"This will. He wants me to cut my honeymoon in half to finish his blasted project."

Mitch stared at the engineer. "Have you seen this guy's bride?" Kalart blushed and nodded. "And you still think he's going to cut his honeymoon short?"

The engineer laughed, but his face was troubled. "No, I didn't really think he would. They just upped the delivery date on me, and I thought I might ask, that's all."

"It'll just have to wait," said Stace. "I'm taking three weeks."

"I thought you guys had that auto-pilot so refined it could take off, fly and land all by itself," Mitch said. "What do you need a test pilot for?" Then he had an idea. "Look, Mel. Here's what you do. You got two of those auto-pilots built yet?"

Mel nodded seriously. "We have a spare, yes."

"Well, you send one of them on the honeymoon with Marilyn, see? Then Stace can stay here and test the one in the aeroplane."

Kato, polishing the bar, laughed explosively. Mel Kalart smiled resignedly and drifted away. Mitch asked. "You going to break down and tell me where you're spending your honeymoon?"

Stace regarded him. "If you don't tell anybody in the plant. We'll be at Rosarito Beach for a week, and then the Hotel Del Paseo in Ensenada."

"Sounds great," Mitch said. A heaviness—a sadness—was beginning to settle on him. He nodded his head at the swirling crowd of men and women round the piano. "You going to miss all this?"

"I don't see why. We don't intend to go and live in a cave, you know. This was a wedding, not a funeral."

"You're right," Mitch said, suddenly lonely in the crowd. He reached for one of Kato's Martinis.

SUE AND Mitch had been on double dates with Marilyn and Stace, and Sue had not realized that the young girl knew so few of the test-pilot crowd. It was as if Stace had deliberately isolated her. Now, taking her from group to group and introducing her, Sue felt a tug of irritation. Stace should be introducing Marilyn, not she. She spotted Stace at the bar, in deep conversation with an Air Force major.

For a while Sue and Marilyn listened to Sparky Lewis at the piano,

while stray women complimented Marilyn. The crowd swirled round them. "Let me get Stace," Sue said finally. "This is ridiculous."

"No," Marilyn said a little desperately. "Don't rush him. Where is the bathroom?"

Sue realized suddenly that the girl had never spent even an evening at the house. "Come on, I'll show you."

When they reached the quiet hall, suddenly Marilyn stood rigid, her eyes wide and her hands trembling, and began to cry.

Sue put her arm round her, guiding her to Stace's bedroom. She stroked her hair as she might have a child's. "Marilyn, don't. Marilyn . . . Don't worry." The girl was shaking. "Do you want me to get you a drink of water?"

Marilyn sat on Stace's bed and nodded. When Sue returned she was staring at the floor. She sipped the water mechanically. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's been such a strain all day." She tried to smile. "I don't know what's been wrong with me."

"I think you've been wonderful," Sue murmured.

Marilyn shook her head. "It's because I'm scared. I'm just plain scared, and I have to face it. Weren't you married once, Sue?"

Sue nodded. Marilyn tensed. "You can tell me—" Her voice broke and she shook her head helplessly.

Sue gave her a Kleenex from a box on the dressing-table. "Marilyn, you'll be very happy. I'm sure you will."

Marilyn looked at her gratefully. "You know, I think it's because I'm afraid of being pregnant. My little brother was born at home, and I can still remember the day. Daddy frantic, and Mother screaming . . . Maybe that's it."

Sue regarded her for a long moment. Could it conceivably help her if she told her?

"Marilyn, I'm going to tell you something nobody knows. Nobody but my doctor. I haven't even told Mitch, or anybody. But I'll tell you."

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"I'm pregnant."

All her life Sue had held an image. It was a changing vision; when she was a young girl it was the classic picture of some tall, dark husband

coming home with a brief-case bulging with important matters, to find her sitting in the pink sunset, knitting tiny clothes. Since Mammoth with Mitch, she had pictured herself flying to the door of some tidy home to meet him after a flight, bursting with happiness. But now she had told someone else first, another girl, and she had to swallow the knot in her throat.

Marilyn's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Sue! Oh, you poor thing!"

"No, wait. That's why I wanted you to know. Even this way, not knowing what's going to happen, it's the loveliest thing in the world. I'm just all happy sometimes, for no reason at all. And when I think of having the baby . . . oh, I'm scared, I guess, but I just *know* it would be wonderful. I can *feel* it. With you, with you and Stace, it'll be heaven. You wait."

Marilyn whispered, "And Mitch doesn't know?"

Sue shook her head.

"Aren't you going to tell him?"

"I don't—I don't know. I can't, until after his flight. You can see that, can't you?"

"Yes. But maybe if you tell him he won't fly it."

"He'd fly it all right. I just don't want to shake him up."

Marilyn squeezed her hand. "He's a wonderful guy, Sue. And when you tell him, he'll marry you."

Sue shook her head blindly. "Don't you see? That isn't the way I want to have him. That's the whole thing. How would I ever know whether that's the reason he married me?" She stood up suddenly. "What a terrible thing to bother you with on your wedding night. I'm ashamed."

"No! You've helped me! You really have, Sue. I've been scared of nothing at all, and here you are just as brave—I'm just a child." She dried her eyes and kissed Sue. "Let's go downstairs. I want to shake Stace away from that bar." She smiled like a little girl. "I think you're wonderful."

Downstairs, the crowd had thinned and the few remaining couples were leaving. Kato was emptying ash-trays. "Mr. Stace, he is loading T-bird. Mr. Mitch, he is in porch."

It was a startlingly clear moonlit night. Mitch was standing alone at the corner of the porch, looking at the moon. Sue put her arm round his waist, but he was so lost in his thoughts that he jumped when he felt her touch. "Oh . . . Hi, Sue." He paused.

"Something's on your mind, isn't it?" she said.

"We all have troubles." He suddenly hugged her close. "Sue, you know, I can step outside on a night like this and lose every problem in the world. Almost, anyway. Do you know how I do it?"

She felt all at once a part of him. "No, Mitch, how?"

"You imagine yourself soaring; climbing, climbing and climbing. To stay on course, you steer for a lonely star. As you get higher and higher into the night you see more and more. South, you begin to see the strip of Baja California hanging down, and north you can see the Sierras and pretty soon even San Francisco Bay." He went on dreamily, "Now imagine that from—oh, say a thousand miles up, we curve over into an orbit. We get into level flight. We're heading east. In a few minutes we're across the whole face of America, like Sputnik."

His eyes narrowed in the faint glow and Sue listened breathlessly. "Now, there are people below us. Where we are, they're sleeping. For just a second we're over, say, Canton, Ohio. Then we pass over New York. I know a lot of people in New York. What are they doing?"

Sue shot him a swift glance, but he was still lost in his reverie. "O.K., don't forget we can see a pretty good hunk of the earth's surface. We can actually see that it's round. O.K., we travel the Atlantic in nothing flat. We're still in the shadow of the earth, but suddenly we burst into sunlight. And below you can see the strip of dawn creeping across Europe, and while we watch, it lights up England."

He looked at her and smiled. "You begin to lose some of the everyday problems now? All those millions and millions of people down there getting up, rubbing sleep out of their eyes, staggering to the bathroom. How many people in the world? What is it, almost three thousand million?"

Sue smiled faintly. "I don't know. But I see what you mean."

He smiled at her, but his eyes were troubled.

"And you're still worried about something. About the plane?"



She wished she had not said it. The moment of closeness was gone with jarring suddenness. She sensed a sudden hardness in Mitch's eyes. "Come on, Sue. Let's get Stace on the road."

Fighting a depression, she followed him into the house.

LOU HASKEL showed his restricted-area pass to the guard at the desk behind the flight-test door. It was early, and most of the half-walled cubicles of the engineering-office spaces were empty. But Pete Nesbit's secretary, a bespectacled blonde, was at her desk, outside his private office. She looked up. "Good morning, Mr. Haskell. He's expecting you, but he isn't here yet."

Lou nodded and said, "I'll wait in his office." He strolled into the panelled room and across the thick green carpet. This office was a quiet, comfortable place to work, and he knew suddenly again the nagging anger that it was not his.

The door opened and Pete Nesbit moved in briskly, squeezing his shoulder as he passed. "Good morning, Lou. How's everything?"

Nesbit moved round his desk and sat down. Something in his casual attitude alerted Haskell. "Pretty good, Pete," he said cautiously. "How's everything here?"

"Fine. How about a cup of coffee?" Lou shook his head.

Nesbit hesitated, then took the plunge. "You know, Lou, Mitch Westerly and Brock Stevenson and Ron Eberly were all in here yesterday."

"Oh? What about?"

"That yawing on Saturday's flight." Pete picked up a paper. "I read his report. And—your addendum. You sure you want the Old Man to read that?"

"Of course I do. Why?"

"Suppose Westerly's right?"

"What do you mean *right*? It's an aerodynamic fact that the centre of gravity doesn't shift back and forth."

"All right. Anyway, Lou, I'm giving him an extra flight."

Lou felt the blood climb to his cheeks. He sat down heavily. "You're *what*?"

"I'm letting Westerly try a Mach-seven flight with the extra telemetering aboard."

Haskel found himself on his feet. "What the hell do you mean? What about the delivery date? What about the twenty-fifth?"

"Take it easy, Lou. Brock says he can strip the plane and still have it ready for an extra flight a week from Thursday. That still leaves two weeks to get it ready for the flight on the twenty-fifth."

"Well, now isn't that cosy? Who's running this project? You or me? Whose tail is twisted if I don't make the delivery date? Yours or mine?"

"Lou, simmer down. If Mitch feels there's something wrong and we can give him an extra hop, why not do it?"

"That isn't the point. He went over my head, and you backed him up. And it's still my responsibility to make that deadline. I'm going to see the Old Man."

Nesbit picked up the phone and dialled the Old Man's office. "Let me speak to Tony Carlos. . . ."

"I don't want to speak to Carlos," grated Lou. "I want to see the Old Man himself."

Nesbit ignored him. "Tony? Lou Haskel's here. You got a minute to talk? O.K. We'll be right over." He stood up. "Let's go, Lou."

Tony Carlos, characteristically suave, met them at the door to his office adjoining the Old Man's. He smiled warmly at Lou, and Lou sat down, studying the young man who had skyrocketed to a position in which he was actually—fantastically—running the company: softly and smoothly making all but the most important decisions. Carlos leaned back against his desk, his dark eyes friendly. Lou smiled tightly. "Tony, how about an appointment to see the Old Man?"

Regret shone on Tony's face. "Gosh, Lou, I'm awfully sorry. He's out on the *Pandora*, fishing off Mexico. He left yesterday."

Lou's heart sank. "When's he coming back?"

Tony shrugged. "You know how he is. He's got an under-secretary of the Air Force out there with him. They might be gone a week. Is there anything I can do?"

Nesbit said, "Lou's browned off because I'm giving Westerly another hop in the Big X."

Tony Carlos moved behind his desk. "Oh, yes. I read this report of his this morning. And your rather—well, amusing—addendum, Lou." He looked at the paper and chuckled. "Lou, are you sure you want to stick your neck out on this thing?"

"Listen, damn it. I want the Old Man to see that. I don't want him to think the whole project's gone off its rocker. But that isn't what I'm here for. I want to know why Nesbit can schedule my hops for me."

"I'm sure it's something we can smooth out."

Pete Nesbit spoke up quickly. "It was my fault, Tony. I should have called Lou."

"I'm head of this project and I'd already turned down an extra hop," Lou said. "Westerly went right over my head. It's the most flagrant abuse of company policy I've ever seen"—he took a breath—"and if it isn't reversed I'm resigning as project head."

For a moment Tony seemed ruffled. "Gosh, Lou, you're really putting me in a spot. There's the radio-telephone, but the Old Man told me not to disturb him unless the whole plant blew up." He smiled a little. "Of course, when an old hand like you says something like that, it's probably worse than the plant blowing up." He hesitated. "Look, Lou. It was Pete's decision to let him fly the extra hop. I know it, and when the Old Man comes back I'll tell him. If there's a delay in the delivery date, it won't be your fault. Let's leave it at that. O.K.?"

The dark eyes were suddenly marble-hard. Lou Haskel, with a start, began to understand Tony Carlos's rise in the company. "O.K., Tony," he said, smiling tightly. "Whatever you say." He nodded to Pete and turned to go. "Sorry I blew my stack, Pete. I'll do my best to get the flight out on time."

Pete Nesbit, a little surprised, squeezed his arm. "I know you will, Lou. And I'm sorry I jumped the gun."

Tony Carlos ushered him to the door and then returned to his desk. "Well," he said, "that cleared the air. I hope . . ."

Pete Nesbit shook his head. "You can't tell about that guy, Tony. He might be dreaming up something right now to scuttle the whole programme."

Tony winced. "Well, that's the price of loyalty, I guess. I see it over

and over· old foremen and doddering pay clerks kept on the pay-roll fifteen years after they should have been retired." He shrugged. "That's the Old Man."

"Listen, Tony, keeping a senile pay clerk is one thing; making a man project head of the X-F18 Programme is another. It scares me."

"Well, Lou isn't senile, you know. And the Old Man's got a lot of faith in Lou as an organizer, and you have to admit he's right. Remember how he got that X-F11 Programme in the air?"

"Sure he can organize, but he's sick. Emotionally, he's sick. Now he's developed this problem into a private feud with Westerly."

"Who's right there, Pete?"

Nesbit crushed out a cigarette. "I wish I knew."

"Well, that's what Ron Eberly's up there for. That's what the Old Man wanted: Ron to slide into the theory part and Lou to hang on to the administration."

"It's not enough. This squabble makes it not enough. Haskell's vindictive, Tony." Nesbit rose. "You and I will have to keep an eye on him. Or somebody's going to get hurt."

MITCH STOOD on the company ramp, watching the twin-engined Beech taxi from the line to pick up the passengers going from Los Angeles to Palmdale. His head throbbed from the morning-after effect of Kato's Martinis, and his mouth was dry. He stood in a deferential group of engineers and technicians, and when the plane stopped they stepped aside so that he could be first in the plane.

He clambered in and sat in the co-pilot's seat. Al Lipscomb, an ex-test pilot who now flew the company shuttle to the desert, glanced at him. "How's it going, glamour boy? Golly, you look awful."

Mitch nodded. "Stace got married last night." Lipscomb smiled. He was a grey-haired, taciturn man who had once flamed out* on take-off, and that had ended test flying for him. He still limped. Now he glanced back to see that his passengers were strapped in, picked up his mike and cleared with the tower. They bounced down the runway and churned over the plant. Mitch sat back in the co-pilot's seat and dozed.

* *Ed* The term flame-out is used when a jet engine stops

He awakened with a yell and found himself diving for the fuel tank selector between the seats. It was deathly silent in the cockpit. The engines had cut out. As he grabbed for the lever, he found Lipscomb's hand on it. The engines throbbed into sudden life.

"God," said Mitch, sheepishly. He was shaking. Lipscomb laughed and shouted above the engines. "What's the matter, buddy? I thought you had nerves of steel. You ain't going to let a little engine failure shake you, are you?"

Mitch found himself blushing. "Well, Al," he said, "when I learned to fly these beasts they taught me to shift a tank *before* it ran dry, not after." He jerked his thumb towards the passengers. "You must have scared the stuffing out of those engineers."

Lipscomb was still laughing. "Didn't scare *them*. I passed the word to them. I was running a test on my fuel gauge." Mitch swung round. The engineers were grinning broadly. *Well*, thought Mitch, *that story will be all over Palmdale tonight. Mitch Westerly, Junior Space Man, panics in the "Blue Beetle."* Just the same, he had wakened out of a sound sleep; his reflexes were still all there, at least. "Verv funny," he said to Lipscomb, and settled back in his seat, closing his eyes.

MITCH SAT in the Big X in the hangar, dressed in his pressure suit and helmet, while he went over the pre-drop check-off list. He had made it an invariable rule to spend the first part of every working day in the cockpit. But he wondered now, sweating even in the cool of the hangar, whether he had not brought himself to too high a peak of perfection. Could he overtrain, like an athlete? An ennui—almost a nausea—washed over him. He slid back the canopy, jerked back his visor. The Big X's intimate smell, so like and yet so unlike all other aircraft—a mixture of leather and fuel and the sour smell of fear—was suddenly more than he could bear. He hoisted himself out of the seat and clambered down the side.

Brock was talking to one of the foremen. He beckoned to Mitch. "What do you think of the activity round here, Mitch?"

Mitch knew that whatever he said in the foreman's presence would be passed round the ground crew. "I think you guys are terrific," he

said "I never thought you could do it." The foreman looked pleased.

Brock drew him to the nose of the plane. With his toe he prodded a black metal box, studded with multi-pronged plugs and sockets. "Your new passenger." Mitch stared at the telemetering device, feeling a shiver race up his legs. The equipment somehow looked menacing, lethal. *This is ridiculous*, he told himself. *It's just another piece of gear* He forced a grin. "Hardly seems worth all the stink we raised, does it?"

Brock looked at him keenly. "Well, it'd better be. You seen Lou Haskel yet? There is one angry engineer."

Mitch shrugged "Well, I guess I'd better go and see him."

"Get him mad. Maybe he'll have a heart attack," said Brock.

In the ready-room Mitch changed into ordinary flight overalls and strolled through the flight office, pausing at Vickie's desk. She looked up, her eyes bright. "Hi, Mitch. Did you want to see Mr. Haskel?"

Mitch nodded. "I'm afraid so, Vickie."

She smiled. "He's not in the best mood" She slid a typewritten page across to him. "Here's a copy of the addendum he wrote to your report."

Mitch read it swiftly, his eyes narrowing. *Why, the fatuous ass*, he thought. "Isn't that clever?" he murmured. He put down the paper, moved to Haskel's door and walked in.

Haskel swung his swivel-chair round. "You want to see me?"

"Well, I thought I'd better talk to you about the extra hop."

"Thanks," said Haskel. "Thanks a lot. Aren't you just a bit late?"

"I'm sorry, Lou They told me on Monday you were putting that stuff in, and I didn't want to waste any time."

"So you went screaming to Pete Nesbit like a baby with wet napkins. Is that right?"

Mitch felt anger wash through his stomach. "Sure I went screaming. Any time somebody modifies the plane I'm flying against my recommendations, I'll scream like a wounded eagle. Is that clear?"

"Why didn't you come to me?"

Mitch fought down nausea. "Come to you? Lou, you wouldn't even believe me in the debriefing."

Haskel looked up. "Westerly, this is the most glaring case of going over the head of a project engineer I've seen in twenty years with

Norco. If the Old Man were in town, I'd give him the choice between firing you or me. He's on his yacht. So I'm stuck with Nesbit's decision. All I have to say is this—" He stood up, glowering. "If that extra hop results in one day's delay—one *day*, brother—it's your scalp, not mine. I'm getting this whole thing in writing, and believe me, friend, I'm covered. Is that clear?"

Mitch nodded. "That's clear." He turned to go. Then he swung round. "Speaking of writing, I read that little gem you appended to my report."

Haskel raised his eyebrows. "You did? Who showed it to you?"

Mitch stared into the cold grey eyes. "Who cares who showed it to me? It's probably all over the plant, which is why you wrote it so cute, like." He relaxed a little. "Frankly, Haskel, I didn't think you had it in you. It's a real classic." He paused at the door. "You'd just better hope to God you're right."

MITCH STOOD on the concrete path outside the flight office, his hands tense on the rail. He looked down at the crew swarming over the Big X, letting the anger subside within him. *Take it easy*, he told himself. *That guy is aching to have you blow your top and foul up the whole thing.*

He heard a step behind him. "I've brought you a Coke," Vickie said.

Mitch drank it gratefully. "Thanks, honey. That character is about to give me ulcers."

"I don't blame you. If I'd known I was going to end up as his Girl Friday, I'd never have come up here."

Mitch crumpled the paper cup. Suddenly he wanted a drink—at two in the afternoon he wanted a drink. And he wanted to be alone—or did he? But Sue wouldn't be back from her present flight assignment for two days. "Vickie," he said suddenly, "how'd you like to meet me after work at the Pit? We'll have a drink and forget this whole set-up."

He had no sooner said it than he wished he could call back the words. Not that Sue would mind—she'd never begrudge him a moment's break in the tedium of the desert—but the very fact that he needed companionship was an admission of turmoil he couldn't afford. He was about to remember another appointment when he looked into Vickie's face. Her eyes were sparkling. "I'd love to. I'd just love to."

CHAPTER 4

SUE STOOD inside the open door of the DC-6 with a bright stewardess smile glued to her face. Her passengers filed past, nodding as she said she hoped they had enjoyed their trip. They shuffled off, she thought in sudden irritation, like cattle from a goods train. This was unfair, she told herself immediately. The long flight from Chicago must have taken more from her than she knew. She would go to her apartment and sleep; then, maybe, she'd go for a dip in the pool.

Would there be a message from Mitch? It could be a long, lonely three-day lay-over for her, with Mitch at Palmdale. Today was Wednesday—tomorrow was his extra flight. The last passenger was approaching. She knew instinctively, from his too-nice salesman smile, that he was going to ask her for a date. He took his coat, smiled gratefully, and then hesitated. "Miss Morgan, I . . . I don't know how to put this, but I'm a stranger in L.A. How about showing me round tonight?"

I'll bet, thought Sue, *he's been shown this town by every stewardess on Pacific Central Airlines.* She shook her head, smiling tightly. "I'm awfully sorry, I won't be free."

He made one last stab. "You'll still be in town tomorrow. How about tomorrow night?"

He even knew the schedules. "I'm sorry. Thank you just the same."

She checked in at "Crew Schedules," then started towards the limousine parking area. Suddenly she saw Brock Stevenson. A bolt of panic tore through her. She ran to him, staring into his weathered face. "Brock! What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you, Sue."

Oh, no, she prayed. *Don't let him say anything's wrong!* "What is it, Brock?"

"Well, it's nothing I can lay my hand on." He stopped, facing her. "Sue, how'd you like to drive up to Palmdale with me?"

"Why?"

Brock shrugged. "Well, I'll tell you——" He led her to his car. Once inside he said, "It's Mitch. He's acting funny, awfully funny."

He swung the car into Century Boulevard. "You live in Westwood somewhere, don't you, Sue?"

"Yes." She gave him the address and waited.

"You know," said Brock, "Mitch and I were on the *Enterprise* together during the war, flying F6's." Sue felt a tug of impatience, but knew Brock too well to hurry him. "Well, the more I got to know him, the more I got to depend on him. I was exec. of the squadron, you know, and he was just a brand-new ensign, but even then he flew like he'd been installed in the plane by Grumman. He seemed to have just exactly the right balance for a fighter pilot. He wasn't one of these characters who's cool just because he's stupid. On the other hand, he didn't panic for eight hours before a hop like some guvs did. Not until the Tokyo raids, anyway."

Brock stopped for a traffic signal. He turned to her. "When they told us we were actually going to raid Tokyo, fly those little beasts up the Ginza strafing and dropping bombs, well—to say we were shaken is an understatement. They told us a week before the first raid, and I don't think I slept twelve hours in the next five days."

The signal changed and Brock pulled away. "And *that* time it even got to Mitch. He suddenly seemed to withdraw. He got really touchy. He had a couple of fifths of whisky stashed away in his bunkroom, to celebrate VJ day with. Well, he started hitting that before the raid. The night before the first strike, he and I got stewed. Of course, then, it didn't matter much. We were younger, planes were slower, a good pilot could booze all night and fly the next day, no strain at all."

"What's this got to do with Mitch now?" Sue asked.

Brock shook his head. "Sue, for the last week he's been acting just the same way. He and that writer Zeke Gresham are out every night living it up. Zeke tries to keep him sober, but Mitch seems to have him convinced that all test pilots get tight every night."

"He's probably trying to hold him down," said Sue. She felt fear rising in her like a chilling tide. "Oh, Brock—do you really think he's scared of it?"

"You're always scared of a plane like this, Sue. It's just a matter of degree."

Sue fought panic out of her voice. "Where is he now?"

Brock shrugged. "He hasn't been to the hangar all day. That's one reason I came down to the airport." He glanced at her swiftly. "I thought you might go up there with me."

"Won't I just get in the way? Isn't he flying tomorrow?"

"That's right."

"On the X-FIT Project, he never wanted me about the day before a flight. He was usually deep in the pre-flight work."

Brock drew to the kerb in front of her apartment house. "That's just it, Sue. He isn't doing any pre-flight work today. I called this afternoon, and my foreman told me that the last anybody had seen of him he and that writer were at the Pit, drinking lunch."

Sue stared at him. "Oh, *no* Oh, Brock, you wait here. I'll change my clothes and be right down."

CHILL DARKNESS had settled by the time they drew up in front of the Yucca Inn. Sue looked at her watch. It was nine fifteen. *He must be back by now—if he's in his room asleep, I won't even awaken him—* "I'll go and see," she said, walking swiftly into the lobby.

The night clerk grinned "Mr. Westerly? Sorry. He isn't in yet."

Desolately she trailed back to Brock's car. "Brock," she said, "he isn't there. And it's past nine o'clock. What time is the hop in the morning?"

"He'll have to be in the hangar by four a.m.," Brock said miserably

And Mitch wasn't at the Pit. None of the test pilots were—the place was almost deserted. "Tommy," Sue asked the bartender, "did you see Mitch here this afternoon?"

Tommy looked uncomfortable as he considered the question, and Sue felt a constraint towards her. She excused herself and went to the rest-room. When she returned Brock was waiting for her at the plate-glass front door. "Tommy says Mitch was with a bunch of people who left to go to Norton's," he said.

"Norton's?" It was a sour-smelling little cocktail lounge with a reputation as a pick-up joint. "Why Norton's? Is he looking for a date? Or trying to hide one?"

In six and a half hours Mitch was due at the plane.

AT NORTON'S they spotted Mitch alone in the press of bodies at the end of the bar. He was listening to the throbbing music, his face dark and thoughtful. She drifted through the crowd and laid her hand on his arm. He jerked round. "Sue!" With the precision of the coldly intoxicated he said, "What the hell are *you* doing up here?"

She felt her face flush. "Brock brought me up."

"You mean he just happened to meet you in the street? Or were you hitch-hiking up the U.S. 6?"

It was an effort, but she kept her voice casual. "He met my flight and asked me. I hope it doesn't disturb you, but it *is* a free country."

"Well, how about a drink?" His voice was harsh. He moved to make space for her at the bar. "God," he said. "This place is a rat race."

She said, "It sure is." She strove for lightness. "How did you happen to end up here?"

He was evasive. "Oh, I was having a drink with Zeke at the Pit, and a bunch of people were coming over here." He pointed across the room. "Zeke's over there."

"Mitch, don't you think you ought to go back to the Inn?"

"What for?" His speech was thickening.

Brock joined them. "Listen, your hop is at four a.m."

"I'll be there," Mitch said. "What's the matter, Brock? Afraid you'll have to fly it yourself?"

Brock did not smile. "What do you think you're doing?"

Mitch shrugged. "What am I supposed to do? Sit in that cockpit all afternoon tickling the switches?"

Brock disdained to answer. "You want a ride home, Mitch?"

Mitch shook his head. "No. What I want is a new drink."

Suddenly, crossing the tiny dance floor, Sue saw the pretty girl who had spoken to Mitch in the Pit after his last flight. She stood for a moment searching the room. Sue knew all at once that she was looking for Mitch and had probably come with him. The brunette's eyes met hers, and the girl, apparently taking in the situation instantly, joined a table of Air Force officers in the corner. Sue looked up into Mitch's face. "Mitch, am I intruding on something? Do you have a date?"

A tide of red crept up his neck. "What makes you think that?"

Sue shook her head. "Something in the way that brunette—what's her name?—was looking for somebody."

"Vickie, you mean? Boy, that's all I need tonight. A jealous woman. No, Sue, I didn't bring her. She came with Vickers and Cooper and that major. We all came over together."

Sue drew Brock aside. "Go home, Brock I'll get him out of here. Just let me speak to him alone." When he left she kissed Mitch's hand and laid it against her cheek. "Mitch, don't be a child. You have to get some sleep. Now, please."

He moved impatiently. "I can't sleep anyway. Test flying," he said thickly, "is a lousy, stinking, crummy way to make a living. Don't ever let anybody tell you different. It's a lousy, stinking, crummy way to make a living." He was so solemn and ludicrously serious that at any other time Sue would have laughed. But now, thinking of the gulf that he must cross so quickly to sobriety, she shuddered.

He went on, "It looks great. You only work about three days out of the week, and the rest of the time you're sitting in a ready-room or lapping it up in the corner bar or reading what some engineer thinks ought to happen in an aeroplane." He swallowed a yawn. "Yeah, it *sounds* great. And think of all the dough you make."

Sue said sadly, "Oh, Mitch."

"Isn't it neat? You're a great big hero. You make lots of money and the dolls all go for you. The only trouble is pretty soon all the other guys have outlived you, and who remembers a dead hero, anyway?"

The tension, the impatience and angry futility of trying to get him to leave rose in Sue like a brackish tide. She wanted suddenly to scream. She forced back the anger and said, "Honey, let's go home. Please?"

He signalled the bartender. "We'll have just one more drink."

She forced herself to say again softly, "Please, Mitch."

This time he smiled glassily. "O.K." Outside, the cold desert air seemed to steady him. "What time is it, anyway?" he asked

"Almost eleven."

"Holy cow! I've got to be up at three!"

She drove so that he could sleep on the way to the Inn. Once in his room, he lay back on the bed. She started to fumble with his shirt, and

he brushed her hand away, sitting up. "You don't have to put me to bed." She waited in the bathroom until she heard the bedspring squeak, then lay down beside him fully dressed. He was fast asleep, lying on his back, an arm thrown over his eyes, breathing in short, almost explosive gasps. She turned off the light.

ONCE, MITCH awakened. There was no moment of transition; at one instant he must have been in deep slumber and at the next he found himself staring at the ceiling. He knew precisely where he was. He sensed Sue breathing beside him. And then the seas of dizziness engulfed him. Above each eye smouldered a throbbing ember of agony. The roof of his mouth was dry and each tooth wore a fuzzy sweater.

He swung his feet over the side of the bed and sat for a long uncertain moment. When he was able, he lurched to the bathroom. He groped for the basin, dreading to turn on the light. But to find the aspirin he had to, and when he glimpsed himself in the mirror his pulse knocked madly. His broad, tanned face was puffed and shapeless. His eyes were unnaturally bright, as if he had a fever. Maybe he was really ill—

Then, with paralysing impact he remembered. Tomorrow—he stumbled out to the dressing-table and looked at his watch—no, *today* he had Flight Number Twelve. It was two forty-five. The latest he could possibly get up would be three thirty.

He called the desk and checked. Sue—or possibly he himself—had left a call for three fifteen. He felt like crying. The grey incredibility of his drunken evening closed in like a fog. It was so fantastically unlike him that it seemed almost to be a nightmare.

There must be some way, he told himself, to abort the flight; to cancel it out. He could claim that he was ill—he *was* ill—and simply refuse to fly until the next day. But what would happen to the September 25 deadline? Would the men on the ground crew work through, once they knew that because of him the Big X stood idle for a day? No, it was simply impossible. Even if it were reasonable for the Big X to lose a day and still be made ready for the last hop, the morale of the crew would suffer so badly that they would never do it.

His mind darted like a caged bird. Finally, feeling the seconds of sleep

passing by, he tried an old trick. He lay back, forcing himself to relax in the way he had learned on the carrier. First, the toes, then the arches, then the calves and up to his stomach and his arms and his neck. Finally he knew sleep. It did not last. He was in the Big X, and he was falling, glued to his seat. He heard himself screaming, "Sue!" As he glanced from the slit window he saw that he was whirling towards the mottled earth. Fatefully, the hangars and runways rushed up at him. He knew with awful certainty that he was going to hit the Norco hangar. He yelled at the people to clear it. And somehow he knew, too, that Sue was inside, waiting for him.

Now he could see figures entering the building. Couldn't they hear him? Couldn't they hear the plane? He screamed again and again.

Suddenly he was awake, sweating and shivering. Sue, braced on an elbow, was leaning over him. The bedside lamp was on. "Mitch, Mitch! What is it?" She shivered and hugged his head to her breasts. He took a long, deep breath, sat up and shook his head. "Oh, brother. I hope that never happens again. You got a cigarette?"

She gave him one. "Mitch, you were screaming at the top of your lungs." Her eyes melted in tenderness. "Oh, darling, it must have been awful!" He smiled tightly. "It was. But it was only a dream."

Then the snarl of the telephone shattered the silence. Mitch picked up the phone, feeling terror crawling towards him along the telephone line. He had expected to hear the desk clerk, but it was Brock. "Mitch?"

"Yeah. What's up?" *It can't be*, he told himself. *There isn't that much luck in the whole world*

Brock's voice was strangely cold. "Mitch, I'm pulling a check on the hydraulic system. I'm not satisfied with it."

"Yes?" Mitch said cautiously.

"It'll take about five hours. That'd make it—let's see—eight o'clock. Now, Haskel wants to know if you'll accept a drop at nine."

Relief sang through Mitch's veins. "Nope. Too much turbulence. Besides, it's against company policy. Right?"

Brock said, "Right. O.K., buddy. Tomorrow morning then?"

"Right," agreed Mitch. He had a sudden twinge. "Hey, Brock! You going to make the date if we slip a day?"

"We'd better," Brock said grimly. Mitch hung up. He looked at Sue. There was a smile tugging at her lips.

"You big lucky oaf!" She was suddenly in his arms, kissing him. Mitch lay back. "Hell," he said in mock bravado, "I could have flown her easy. Piece of cake."

"I'll just bet you could. Mitch, what happened?"

"Hydraulic trouble," he said.

Sue smiled thoughtfully. She stroked the back of his hand. Looking into her eyes, Mitch knew that he could never hide anything from her.

"Mitch," she asked softly, "you're afraid of it, aren't you?"

"Yes, Sue, I guess I am." His voice was metallic in his ears.

Desperately, hopelessly, she said, "Then please, *please*, darling. Give it up. Please."

"I can't." He switched out the light. She lay stiff and cold beside him, staring into the darkness. "I can't," he said again. "I just plain can't."

MITCH RACED across the desert at the wheel of a company car, boring through the pre-dawn darkness towards the Norco hangar. The day before he had spent with Sue, swimming, driving her to an early dinner at Brock's and Nita's so that she could catch a ride back to Los Angeles. Then he had seen a film, and by nine o'clock he had been in bed. Now, in the chill desert air, the last vestige of his debauch seemed gone. He parked by the hangar, shivering a little in his flight jacket when he stepped from the car. He climbed to the ready-room, opened his locker and sat down to untie his shoes. Wally Marks, who would fly the B-58 mother plane, wandered in and hung up a garish sports coat. "Hi, Mitch. We going to take a little ride this morning?"

The tubby pilot's cheerfulness was irritating. Mitch nodded. Wally opened his locker and drew out his flight suit. When he had dressed he wandered off to check the weather, and Ron Eberly strolled in.

"Mitch," the engineer said diffidently. "I hate to bother you before a flight, but I wanted to talk to you."

Mitch was for some reason glad to see him. "Yes, Ron? Shoot."

"How are you going to handle this hop? I mean—how are you going to handle the controls?"

"Normally."

Eberly walked to the window and looked out. Then he turned. "Do you fly with your feet on the rudder pedals?"

Mitch said, "This plane, yes. It's a safety precaution. I like to know I can damp out a yaw if it develops."

"What do you think about taking your feet off the pedals right after light-off?"

Mitch considered. He shook his head. "Frankly, I don't like it. If a yaw develops, I need every split second I can get. Just getting my feet back on the pedals takes time."

"Maybe if you keep your feet off the pedals a yaw won't develop."

Mitch felt as if he had lost his only friend. "My God, Ron, do *you* think I overcontrolled last week too?"

Ron shook his head. "No. But, Mitch, it could be that, at the high speed you're reaching and with the excess weight of this added equipment, a tiny movement might become magnified in a way we couldn't predict. Just the weight of your feet on the pedals, or an imperceptible pressure that you're not even aware of . . . Oh hell—I don't even know if I'm right. It's just a theory. A wild one."

"No, go ahead."

Eberly shrugged. "That's all. Maybe in that one area of speed, with the excess weight added, a pressure that you're not even conscious of applying might start a yaw. The answer? Keep off the controls."

"Brother! I hate to think the thing's that unstable."

"Well, obviously it isn't at *all* speeds. And at least it's a theory."

"Yes," Mitch said slowly. He picked up his pressure helmet. "I'll think it over and maybe give it a try."

They went out to where the big four-jet B-58 Hustler squatted in lonely majesty with the Big X inside her. Automatically, Mitch looked for Haskel, traditionally the last to speak to him before a flight. He was in his car, and for a moment their eyes met. Then Haskel's flicked coolly away. *It's not his baby, this flight*, Mitch thought. *He's going to pretend it isn't happening . . .*

Mitch and Wally Marks walked together towards the Hustler, followed by Chip Duncan, Wally's flight engineer, and Roger Myers,

the handler. Roger, riding as the rearward man in the Hustler's crew of three, would be the only human being Mitch would see from the time he climbed into the Big X until he stopped on Rogers Lake.

Now, while Wally Marks pre-flighted the Hustler, Myers and Duncan helped him up the ladder to the Big X. He swung into the cockpit. For a few moments the familiar operations of strapping himself in, of checking his switch positions occupied him so that he could ignore a trickle of fear seeping coldly into his stomach. Then, with his pressure helmet on, with the life-giving umbilical cord of oxygen firmly in place, he had minutes to wait, solitary in his misery, in the chill dark cockpit in the jet bomber's vault-like bay until Wally and his crew climbed into the Hustler and could speak to him on intercom. "Big X from Mamasan," he heard over his headset, "how do you read me?"

"Five by five, Wally. How me?"

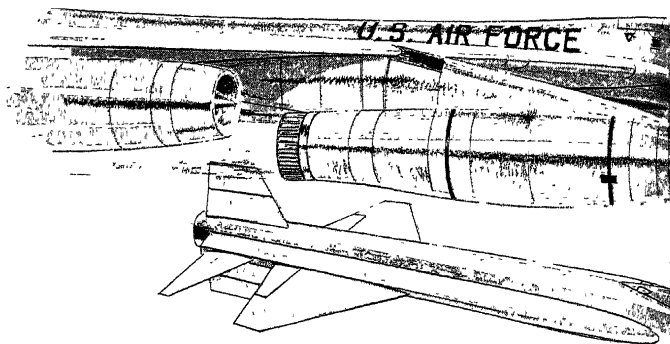
"Five by five. Your pre-take-off switches set?"

Mitch swept the cockpit with a glance. "Set."

"Roger. I'm starting my engines."

Mitch closed the Big X's hatch, insulating himself from the engines' noise. In an amazingly short time, blind in the dark bomb bay, he sensed the gentle rocking that meant that the mother ship was taxiing to the runway. He heard Wally call, "Edwards Tower, this is Project X-Ray for take-off." The tower operator's voice came back. "Roger, Project X-Ray. You're cleared for take-off runway twenty-two. Good luck. Out." The Big X swayed on her shackles as the mother plane began to pick up speed. Mitch heard the tower again. "Attention all aircraft in the Edwards operating area. Project X-Ray will be air-borne for one hour. All aircraft remain clear of Rogers Lake. The lake bed will be closed except for emergencies. Out."

Now the Hustler was gaining speed, and the Big X rocked more violently on her shackles. Mitch knew that in seconds they would be air-borne, that then the Big X would ride smoothly and securely. He could sense from the smooth acceleration that the take-off was normal, but the sensation of sitting blindly and being hurled along inches from the ground was almost more than nerves could endure. Gripped now in the Big X with her explosive fuel, he was riding a bomb only inches



from destruction. The rumble of the Hustler's wheels was suddenly gone, and the wheels whined into their wells. They were air-borne. Mitch felt a tide of relief creep up his arms and legs. He relaxed. Now he had nothing to do for forty minutes, while the B-58 staggered to the drop altitude of fifty thousand feet. Then Myers, his handler, cut in on the intercom. "Ready to top off, Mitch?"

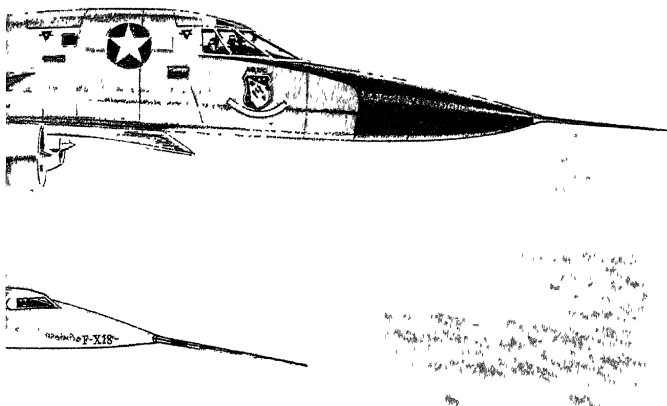
Mitch grimaced. *He* should have asked for the topping off of his liquid oxygen and fuel tanks. Left less than full on the ground, so that spilling could not endanger the take-off, they had to be brimming before the speed run. But he, not Myers, should have initiated the operation. "Go ahead," he growled.

Nothing, he knew, would kill him as surely as absent-mindedness. Once again he checked his switches, fighting down fear. He heard Myers. "Terminating top-off."

"Roger."

Chip Duncan said, "Ten minutes to drop time."

"Roger." He looked at his knee pad for the memorized check-list, and read it aloud on the intercom so that Duncan could check him.



"Ten minutes—controls unlocked and tested." He moved the stick and rudders, testing them. "Hydraulic pressure O.K. Jettison capsule armed. Flight instruments checked. T-5 temperature O.K. . . ."

Now he had about five minutes to wait. He glanced at his altimeter.

"We're at forty thousand," said Wally Marks, as if reading his mind. "Approaching Salt Lake."

"Roger," said Mitch. Consciously he made himself relax. His mouth was dry from the pure oxygen, but when he licked his lips he found on them the tang of sweat.

Then, like a Beethoven symphony, the tempo began to speed.

"One minute to drop time," said Duncan.

"Beginning prime," Mitch said. "Recording tapes running. Camera set. Firing switches on. . . ."

The voice went on "Roger. O.K., ten seconds . . . nine . . . eight . . ."

Mitch's muscles tensed. "Seven . . . six . . . five . . ."

With an effort Mitch squirmed in the seat, shaking out some of his tautness. He placed his feet on the rudder pedals, right hand on the stick, left hand on his knee close to the rocket-firing studs.

"Three . . . two . . . one . . . drop!"

Forward in the cockpit, Wally Marks's thumb found the bomb-release pickle. Mitch heard a metallic "chunk" as the shackles which bound the Big X released. And he was plummeting out of the bomb bay into the virginal sunlight of fifty thousand feet.

For a paralysing moment, Mitch sat immobile in the cockpit. He was weightless, falling as the Big X fell, and suddenly reminded of his nightmare. The silence in the tiny cockpit was unbearable. Where was Vickers? Where was the "O.K." from the chase plane?

"Good drop," he heard someone say loudly. "No boiling off, no apparent vapour leak. . . . No structural vibration evident. . . ."

Somewhere behind him, then, roared the F-104 chase plane. But it was not Vickers's voice! The knowledge that the unemotional colonel, who had been assigned to each of the preceding flights, was not his chase, was as chilling as cold water in his face. The unfamiliar voice went on, "Good drop. Falling free."

Mitch braced himself and flicked Number One firing stud. Then, automatically, before Number One could fire he flicked Two and Three. One caught, with a shattering blast of power, just as he flicked Four. Then in rapid succession, each accompanied by a mighty shove at the base of his spine, Two, Three and Four rocket engines cut in.

His chase pilot said, "One fired. Two fired. Three fired. Four? Four fired. So long, mister. See you in half an hour."

The mighty pillar of flame shot him forward. He let his body sag backward as the incredible forces of acceleration worked on him. He glanced at his Machmeter, easing up the nose as he saw it pass Mach one, the sound barrier—that first obstacle that had crumbled so few years before—and, fallen, was violated now by military pilots almost daily.

The second of the three barriers that he must penetrate lurked at a relatively low altitude near sixty thousand feet—the "heat barrier." The temperature of the Big X's skin, he knew, was rising now—would shoot to perhaps one thousand degrees and turn cherry-red before his eyes as he violated the barrier. If at this moment his refrigeration failed, he could roast alive in seconds. But by the time the thought reached his mind, he was through the thermal phase, and pushing

Mach four in the thin air of the stratosphere. He heard the chase pilot. "I'm losing sight of him, apparently around sixty thousand feet. I'm shifting to radar tracking. . . ."

The voice of the chase pilot grew fainter. He felt suddenly a desolate intruder in the blue wastes, abandoned by the very men on whom he had depended. On previous flights he had almost welcomed the detachment. Now, he was unexplainably angry at those who tracked him on his lonely trajectory. "Ground control from Project X," he said. "I'm hitting Mach four at eighty thousand." He heard Lou Haskell's voice, garbled by distance. "Roger. Can you give me some readings?"

Irritably, because the readings would be available from the telemetering transmission, because the very black box that was the basic cause of the extra flight was reporting much more swiftly and accurately than Mitch could, he blurted out a few outside air temperatures versus Mach readings as he bored on. A glance at the swiftly moving pointer on his altimeter . . . He was approaching 100,000 feet—twenty miles—and most of the earth's atmosphere lay below him as he burst from the imaginary limits of the stratosphere into the chemosphere.

He began to tense. In the chemosphere lay the strange area—the so-called "controllability barrier"—in which he had experienced the weird feeling of a shift in his centre of gravity. On each of previous eleven flights, at 130,000 feet, he had felt a certain mulishness, a reluctance in the Big X to finish the climb. He knew the cause—simply an inherent distrust within the aircraft of air grown so thin that its mass was almost negligible. It was as if a fast-moving skier had swooped from hard-packed to powdery snow on skis too thin and short to support his weight. It was a transitory phase, during which the Big X would pass from flight as a conventional aircraft supported by wing and tail surfaces to the next step—flight as a projectile hurtling from a cannon.

The first time he had pierced the controllability barrier, he had sat immobile as the Big X had shuddered, shaken, and, gaining speed, shed her hesitancy for the free flight beyond. That was, of course, what she had been bred to do. And because after the first flight Mitch had known that she would thread through this last barricade against outer space, he had grown to anticipate it, almost to welcome it for its promise of

burn-out thereafter and the indescribable weightlessness of the free flight to follow. But fat, dumb and happy, he had entered this area on the last flight to encounter a force which he felt could snuff out his life as a smoker grinds out a cigarette.

So now he waited tensely. "Ground control from Project X," he said. "Approaching 130,000 feet—Mach 6.2."

The reply was garbled by distance. He could feel his heart knocking madly. He took a deep, dry breath and swallowed. Then, with his knees trembling, he slid his feet reluctantly from the rudder pedals. "Eberly, boy, I hope to hell you're right," he muttered.

It began as an almost imperceptible vibration, a thrill that seemed to start at the very point of the lance-like nose probe and to pass down the length of the ship and to be dispelled with the gases from the rockets throbbing behind him.

Then another wave of vibration passed through the ship, a shiver as if she were afraid of the beyond. Then a more definite shuddering; a more dogged shaking, but still passing along the airframe in a wave. The silver probe began to describe tiny circles before him, as if the Big X were pointing out clusters of stars in the dark blue beyond.

Mitch felt his leg muscles tense. With all his strength he fought down an involuntary motion, born in his earlier flight training, to place his feet back on the pedals to damp out the oscillation. And yet, it was only that—an oscillation. It had none of the yaw which had tossed him like a helpless pup in a mastiff's jaws on the flight before.

"Ground control from Project X," he transmitted, hearing that they were receiving him. "I'm going through the controllability phase. No yaw . . . yet."

His headset crackled into surprising life. It was his chase plane, seventy thousand feet below, a link with the ground-control party. "Project X from Chase. . . . They want to know are you damping with the rudders?"

So, Mitch thought bitterly, *if the plane throws me they'll be able to claim I did it myself.* "Negative," he said.

With a last sweeping arc the nose settled down. Exultation began to sing through his veins. He was through—through the phase that had

lurked like a monster in his consciousness. The Big X would make it, extra weight and all. And now, at any rate, it was almost out of his hands. He had a few more seconds of semi-control, then burn-out and long soaring free flight in which, save for controlling his altitude with tiny control jets in nose and wing, he could only sit like a passenger as the Big X swung along her arcing trajectory.

"Ground control from Project X. Through the controllability phase." He glanced at his Machmeter. "Mach 6.8."

At this incredible speed, the inherent lag in most of his instruments was giving him readings which had been true miles astern, but he was reassured to see that they were all "in the green" and functioning properly. Four g's and Mach 7.0 at burn-out would automatically mean that he was on the proper trajectory—a trajectory that would take him to a fantastic hundred and fifty mile altitude somewhere over Nevada before he plummeted back into the chemosphere not far from Las Vegas. He glanced at his rocket-second indicator. He had twenty seconds left until burn-out. With the vestige of control that remained in the near-vacuum, he eased the nose down imperceptibly from the steep climb. The Mach needle quivered and glided slowly up to Mach 7. Exultant pride engulfed him. *O K, you so-and-so's*, he told the engineers silently. *You can't do any better than that.* . . .

The rocket-second indicator slipped to zero. All at once the crushing force cramming him backward was gone. Burn-out! The never-to-be-familiar sensation of weightlessness was back and he floated free in the cockpit against his shoulder straps. His feet rose slightly from the floor boards and he was off on another free-swinging ride through space. "Project X to Ground Control," he said happily. "Burn-out. Over and out."

Then he sat back to enjoy the weightless ride so few knew—the weirdly ecstatic feeling of free flight that he could never describe to the flight surgeons or the engineers or even to Sue. A tide of thankfulness that he was the one experiencing it was muddled with impatience that in this craft it must end so soon. But at least the hope was his that he might be the one to first experience it for significant periods—the first to go into orbit and feel the cosmic freedom of a body in space.

Now he could unchain his eyes from the gauges on his panel and lose himself for a few minutes in the grandeur of the purple sky.

Or could he? A tiny doubt pricked at his consciousness. Was he worthy of this? Angrily, he shoved the doubt aside.

BUT DOUBT returned. It returned when he began the long fall back towards earth, as he rode through the ionosphere, closer and closer to the point where he must repenetrate the controllability area. He battled the nagging impulse, the maddening compulsion that tore at him. Was he crazy? he asked himself. Did prolonged weightlessness affect the brain? Why had he this mad desire to try the rudder pedals? He fought it down, glancing at the altimeter. 140,000 feet—almost, not quite.

Keep your feet on the deck, he told himself. *And what will you have proved?* Another part of his brain asked the question, and he grimaced behind his plastic mask. The mild vibration began, then the trembling, then the waves of rumbling oscillation just as they had five minutes before, during the climb. He kept his feet away from the pedals until after the oscillations died. Then he began a gentle gliding arc to the south-west, and, in the unbelievable silence of unpowered flight, settled back to head for Rogers Lake.

MITCH FACED Lou Haskell across the conference table. Now that he had finished his report, the engineers were jubilant. There was an air of "We knew it all the time—figures don't lie" in the room. Even Haskell's face seemed somehow softer. "Well, Westerly, are all your fears quieted now?"

Mitch studied his finger-nails. "I don't know, Lou."

Lou's face hardened. "What do you mean you don't know? The yawing didn't occur. What's wrong now?"

Mitch saw Eberly studying him speculatively. "I tried something different this time," Mitch said. "I kept my feet off the rudder pedals."

There was a stir round the table. Mitch realized that to those of the engineers who were not aerodynamicists or pilots this probably represented a fantastic feat of courage. "It doesn't mean anything," he explained. "Most pilots don't use the pedals much in a jet anyway."

Although it's really comforting to have rudder control at a critical phase," he added dryly "It was Ron's idea."

"It means something to me," Lou said. "It means you proved that on the previous flight you caused that yaw yourself."

Mitch flushed. "Does it, Lou? Just think it over. All it proved is that with no rudder pressure at all—and I mean *no* rudder pressure—we can apparently get through the controllability barrier with the excess weight. All it means is that we may have an aeroplane that's so impossibly unstable when we add weight to it that you have to keep your feet off the rudder pedals at the most critical point, or else it throws you like a race-horse with a burr under its tail."

"Or it might not be design weakness. It might, as we said, be a new phenomenon of high-speed flight," Ron said.

"Well," Lou said acidly, "the proof would have been simple. You go through that barrier twice; once going up and the other time coming down. Why didn't you give it some rudder when you repenetrated the atmosphere and find out?"

Mitch stared at him. *I almost did*, he thought, *which is a lot more than you would have done*. "Because it damn near killed me on Flight Number Eleven, Lou. That's why."

"I can't understand it, Mitch," said Haskell. "First you claim you got the yaw because we added some weight forward. Now you have a new theory—if you so much as look at the rudder pedals, you get the yaw. Now what the devil *do* you claim?"

Ron Eberly spoke up. "Let's recapitulate, Lou. He actually claims that he gets this yaw when three conditions are met: first, extra weight forward; second, high-speed flight at the altitude of the controllability barrier; and third, rudder pressure to *any* degree."

"That's right," Mitch said. "Take out the black boxes, slow down the Mach number, or keep your feet off the rudder pedals—a pretty dangerous technique, you'll admit—and maybe we don't have it."

"Which do you prefer?" Lou asked. "One, the black boxes have to stay. Two, if we don't make Mach eight we might as well be testing a kiddy car for all the good it will do the Air Force. You want me to issue a job order to hack out the rudder pedals?" He smiled and then

went on, "You won't be able to land, but maybe we can put you into orbit."

Someone laughed nervously. "Listen, Lou," Mitch said. "I found out today that she'll fly this way. If you guys don't care enough to find out what made her yaw, neither do I. Just don't ask me to lay in any rudder pressure on that aeroplane. O.K.?"

Lou Haskell looked up at him. "Westerly, all I want is a Mach-eight flight by September twenty-fifth. I don't care whether you've discovered a new principle of flight, I don't care if you fly the stinking thing *inverted* as long as we fill in the flight envelope. Is that clear?"

"That's clear," said Mitch. He stood up, then picked up the flight-control cards and joggled them on the top of the table. "Anybody here happen to know why Vickers didn't fly chase today?"

Haskell flushed. "I requested a new chase pilot."

Mitch felt his muscles tense. "You *what*?"

"I said, I requested a new chase. In case you ran into that yaw again, I wanted a fresh outlook on how you handled it. I think Vickers was prejudiced."

The enormity of Haskell's presumption strangled Mitch's words. *Why, you fat slob, he thought, I ought to slug you so hard . . .* He called on the discipline of the air to help him: the ingrained law that under stress you kept emotion from your voice. "That's my butt in that bucket seat, Lou. I'm picking my own chase pilot. Is *that* clear?"

Without waiting for an answer, he left the office.

RON EBERLY caught up with him as he was climbing into his company car. "Mitch," he said, "I want you to know that we don't all feel the way Lou does."

"Thanks," Mitch said. "And—thanks for the hint this morning. Now I know how to get through the controllability phase, anyway."

"Sure. That's something," Ron said quickly.

Mitch grinned at him. "But it isn't enough, is it?"

Eberly looked vaguely guilty. "Not enough?"

"You'd like to know what happens when I apply rudder pressure in the controllability phase, wouldn't you?"

Eberly shook his head. "No, Mitch. Not unless I can work it out on the ground."

"I almost did, you know, coming down. I wish I had, at Mach seven. I'll never get up the guts to do it at Mach eight."

"I hope not," Eberly said. He hesitated. "I hope not," he said again

SUE, IN uniform, broke eggs in the skillet on Mitch's stove. This morning, with her Chicago flight scheduled at ten thirty, she had awakened at six, longing to see Mitch, to talk to him. Why shouldn't she? Suppose he *was* moody and withdrawn. She could stand it, and a good breakfast might lighten his spirits. But she had been wrong. Now she felt strangely laden and desolate herself

When the eggs were cooked, she brought their dishes to the living-room bar. Mitch was sitting on a tall stool, his face deep in the morning paper. He had not yet shaved. He looked tired. He was wearing dungarees and a T-shirt, and there was about him an air of dissolution that she had never seen.

"That aviation editor. Now he claims they've worked out my chances of survival. Actuarially, no less." He read from the paper. "*The rumoured flight yesterday of the Norco X-F18 to an undisclosed altitude reminds us that at the start of the programme Mitch Westerly, project pilot, was estimated actuarially to have a ninety-five per cent chance of surviving the programme. With the deadline for delivery to the Air Force approaching, Mitch must be feeling pretty good.*"

"Well, what's wrong with that?"

"Oh, Sue. How do you estimate a pilot's chances 'actuarially?' At Mach eight? I estimate my chances at a hundred per cent if I get back, and zero if I don't. Honest, if I thought Zeke Gresham was going to write that kind of junk I'd call the whole deal off today."

"If it's junk, he won't. How's he coming?"

"He can wring more technical information out of a guy in ten minutes than a Chinese brainwasher could get in a year." He toyed with his egg. "He's coming over about ten o'clock."

She glanced at her watch. "Darn! I'll probably miss him. I have to be at the airport at ten thirty."

"I wish I could take you," Mitch said without enthusiasm.

"No. You'd miss Zeke." She glanced at him. "Are you going to shave before he gets here?" Hating herself for prodding him, she peered into his eyes. "What's wrong, Mitch?"

"Nothing's wrong at all."

She began to clear away. "It is though. I thought the strain was off—you'd solved the problem. Are you still worried about the plane?"

"About the plane? No, not so much."

His eyes dropped. Sue, who had been violently sick earlier, who had slept poorly, who had a gruelling day on the Chicago flight facing her, felt suddenly that she could endure not one more care.

"You *are* worried about it. You're worried and it's tearing us apart." Her voice rose. "Mitch, please! If you don't think it's safe, *don't* fly it!"

"I think it's safe." His eyes were veiled, sullen.

"No," she sobbed. "You don't at all. And I just can't stand it." She took a deep, shuddering sigh and faced him squarely. *He's afraid*, she told herself, *and I'm afraid for him, and there's only one weapon left*. She had known for days that she would throw her love into the balance if he could not overcome his fear, she knew now that this was the wrong moment, but there was not much time. The Big X, or the fear of it, was rotting Mitch like a cancer. "Mitch you have to decide. Give up this project, or—give me up."

He walked to the window. When he swung back, his face was hard. "You know," he said, "you sound like my ex-wife"

"That isn't fair," she said. It wasn't. She was not asking him to give up his career, to quit what he loved, but only to give up a single project that through his own fear would destroy him as surely as a bullet in his brain. "That's not fair—" she began again, but now the words were locked in her throat.

"It's the same answer, Sue. This is my baby, and I'm flying it."

She ran up the stairs, fighting sobs, and threw herself on his bed. When she had control of herself, she got up and went back down the stairs. Mitch was sitting at the window, sipping a drink. "Cocktail hour?" she asked acidly.

He rose. "I'm sorry, Sue," he said. His eyes were miserable. She felt herself melting, and consciously stiffened.

"I meant it, Mitch. Me or that flight. I'm not asking you to give up flying, just that particular plane."

He shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry, Sue."

They met Zeke at the door, and Mitch asked him to wait inside. Then he followed her down the path to her car. He helped her in and stood looking down into her eyes. "I can't, Sue. I can't quit now."

There was in his face such loneliness, such an unspeakable longing to be understood, that for a moment she almost dissolved. Then, stifling a sob, she started her car and pulled away.

MITCH SAT on the couch next to Zeke. He tried to keep his mind on the interview, answering questions into the dictating machine Zeke had set up on the coffee table. He picked at his memory. "I guess I was always interested in planes. Back in '28 or '29, my dad used to think that the fishing was good on the San Francisco side of the Golden Gate. So he'd take me across the Bay to the rocks near Crissy Field. It was—I guess it's still there—a little strip laid right along the beach.

"Well, I'd leave the old man fishing on his rock and wander up to the strip and watch those old crates—open-cockpit jobs—come whistling down for landings. I can still remember the pilots glancing at me as they went by. I guess I must have jumped and hollered and waved or something, because one Sunday one of them waved at me just as he was about to touch down." He smiled. "I ran back to my dad yelling about it and slipped and fell on my tail and slid down a rock and couldn't sit down for a week." Zeke chuckled.

"There was something about those old yellow biplanes—something informal and exciting that we never see any more." Mitch shrugged. "Well, about that time we were living in an apartment opposite Lake Meritt. You could smell my rubber solution and the aircraft dope half-way round the lake, they tell me. I used to crash about one model plane a week into that fool water, but it never slowed me up a bit. Spads, Nieuports" He grinned. "And magazines—you remember the

old *Wings Magazine*? I got so involved that I almost flunked out of school. The old man took all my magazines and locked them up."

"How were your grades at school later on? After your dad locked up the magazines, that is?"

"Pretty good, especially after I found out the only way to get a commission in the Air Corps was to go to West Point."

"Did you try for West Point?"

"No. About the time I got out of high school, the Army Air Corps opened up to guys with a couple of years of college, and that looked quicker, so I went to the University of California instead. Then Navy flying looked more interesting, so I went to Pensacola."

"I see. And you never deviated—you never thought you'd like to do anything but fly?"

"No. No, Zeke, I didn't."

"That's amazing—that anybody at that age could pick what he wanted to do and stick at it all the way through. No wonder you've got the top project in the country."

"Just lucky, I guess," Mitch said.

"I wonder if it's worth it?"

"Worth it?" How could he explain? "Well, even now, at the altitude the Big X can reach, I get a feeling of detachment—a thrill I can't even describe. Think how it'll be in an orbiting space vehicle: the first man to experience prolonged weightlessness, to be actually in space."

Zeke smiled, phrasing his questions for the recorder. "Mitch, when did you first begin to conceive that in our time we might realize space travel?"

Mitch considered the question. "Probably not much ahead of the layman," he said finally. "It was so incredible—so close to the fantasies I'd had all my life about rocket ships and moon travel. It happened so quickly that I think it caught me unaware. Sometimes I wonder how, out of all the test pilots in the country, I should fluke into the one spot I did."

"And now that you have it, how do you feel about it? How do you *really* feel?"

Mitch walked to the window. He wondered if Sue had taken off.

Could he phone her? No, it was too late. He turned. "I'm pretty scared, as you probably know. But there's something else—something more important about it. It's the biggest thing I've ever tackled, you know."

"You feel—well, humble?"

"That's it."

"Shall I quote that?" Zeke asked with a grin.

"You do, and I'll beat your brains out with that talking machine."

Zeke began to pack it. "Well, it's almost noon. How about lunch in one of these pitch-black Hollywood restaurants?"

"Sounds great." He faced Zeke. For some reason he felt the need to mention Sue. "You really arrived at the right time this morning, Zeke. Sue was blowing her top."

Zeke shrugged. "They'll do that sometimes. She's a wonderful girl, Mitch. I've never met anyone like her."

Mitch looked at him curiously. *He's half in love with her himself*, he thought. "I haven't either," he said. He reached for understanding to the writer. "Did you know," he said softly, "she is a widow?"

Gresham's eyes narrowed. "No. No, I didn't."

"Her first husband was killed."

For a moment their eyes held. Gresham smiled gently. "I see Mitch," he said. "I see."

CHAPTER 5

FOR A WEEK Mitch ignored the physical presence of the Big X, even cutting out his regular cockpit drills in the hangar. Meanwhile Brock Stevenson's men tore at her. Stripped of her covering, for days she stood skeletonized while the ground crew checked every hydraulic vein, every fuel artery, every electrical nerve in her body. Then she began to regain her shiny sleekness as the skin sections were returned. Three days before the flight it was as if she had just emerged from the factory; save for a few access panels she seemed ready to fly.

Mitch in this last stage returned to basics. For a week, he sat in the ready-room, slogging through page after page of aerodynamic theory. What he had failed to learn in the air he now seemed driven to pursue

in the formula-strewn pages of papers and texts. For the first time he regretted having failed to return to college after the war.

Ron Eberly helped. The two men would sit in the locker-room while Ron filled page after page of yellow foolscap with neat diagrams. Eberly, who Mitch began to suspect was touched with genius, could in seconds clear the undergrowth from a text-book passage and lay bare the path to some obscure aerodynamic point. Because both men pursued the same problem—the reason for the unexplainable yaw—a tight bond gripped them. Several nights they stayed in the ready-room long after all but the security guard and Brock's men had left.

Ron used the green lockers of the ready-room as blackboards. One night, during a discussion of stability, his voice trailed off and he stood transfixed by a diagram in yellow chalk he had just drawn. Then he began to pace. "O.K.," he recapitulated. "You tell me that this thing feels like the centre of gravity's moving back and forth round the extra weight. The trouble is, just as Lou and the other boys say, the centre of gravity just doesn't shift unless you physically move some weight. Right?"

Mitch nodded. "Go ahead."

"O.K. Let's assume they're right. Let's assume your centre of gravity can't change after take-off, except where fuel is concerned—and we have that worked out. Then what else could give you the same effect?"

"Heck, Ron, I don't know."

"We already know the centre of *pressure* can shift at high Mach numbers?"

"But it stays where it shifts to, doesn't it? At a given Mach number?"

"It's supposed to. But suppose your centre of pressure, for some reason, moved back and forth a little as you continue at high Mach numbers?"

Mitch found his pulse pounding. "Yeah. Suppose it did? Where it's happening you've got air so thin that you're half stalled already, you've got extra weight forward, you're balanced on a knife-edge anyway, all you'd need would be a little tap on the rudder to lose control. But *does* the centre of pressure move?"

"I just don't know, Mitch."



Mitch's voice was hoarse. "How do we find out?"

Eberly dropped his eyes. "On paper."

"On paper?" Mitch walked to the window and looked out. For security's sake, heavy floodlights washed the hangar area. A gusty desert wind swirled dust across the almost deserted parking area. He turned back. "No, Ron. You know better. You don't find new aerodynamic phenomena with a slide rule. You find them in the air."

"What do you propose to do about it?"

Mitch remembered the sickening lurch of the Big X on the Mach-six flight. "Not a thing," he said bitterly. "Not a damned thing."

HE WAS studying one morning when the ready-room door opened. He looked up and froze. "Stace!" he exclaimed. "What in blazes are you doing back from your honeymoon?"

Stace smiled. "I came back to see if they didn't want to put in the first string yet."

"No kidding, Stace. What's today? Wednesday? You've got another week."

"Well, I knew Kalart was in trouble with the auto-pilot programme. I came back to help."

"You mean you've cut short a honeymoon in Mexico for *that*?" Mitch stared unbelievably. "Where's Marilyn?"

"She's at the house, getting squared away. You'll have to come over."

"Wait till she shakes things down a little. Give her a chance."

Stace shrugged. "Come to dinner tomorrow night."

"You'd better ask her."

"It'll be all right."

So THE next evening, after reading a treatise on stability Ron had given him, Mitch drove through Palmdale to a newly built residential district in the desert. After passing scores of ranch-style homes, each first cousin to the next, he found the address and walked up the flag-stone path. He pressed the door-bell and heard a muted gong somewhere in the house. He heard Stace's voice, crisply harsh, at the back. He pressed the button again. In a moment the door opened and Marilyn,

exquisite in a frock with a flaring skirt, was smiling up at him. There was the tiniest memory of a tear in her eye.

"Oh, Mitch. You're our very first guest. Let me show you the house." She looked behind him. "I thought you might bring Sue."

"She isn't in Palmdale. I haven't seen her for a while."

Marilyn seemed disappointed, but lost herself in showing him the house, from the car-port at the back to the immaculate bedrooms and sparkling kitchen. Stace spoke from the panelled living-room. "Let the poor guy have a drink, Marilyn. He's a bachelor and doesn't understand these things."

"Don't let him worry you, honey," Mitch said. "I think the place is beautiful."

They sat in the living-room and sipped Martinis, while Marilyn described a tiny town where they had been stranded on the way to La Paz. Stace was watching with strange longing as she spoke. When Marilyn's eyes would meet her husband's, she would hesitate in her narration. An inarticulate void would somehow open between them.

Dinner was perfect—a solid refutation of all the new-bride stories Mitch had ever heard. They had fried chicken and home-made rolls. Marilyn said, "I don't think we'll ever see Spanish moss in the back garden here, but at least once a week we're going to eat Southern."

"It's enough to make a guy get married," Mitch said, sitting back. "What a spread . . ."

"Mitch!" The flushed, almost childish face was alight with excitement. "Let's call Sue."

Mitch frowned. "I don't know if she's on a flight or not."

Marilyn jumped up. "Let's call her anyway."

Mitch, hesitantly, gave her the number. She placed the call, sitting excitedly in the den. Sue was home. Marilyn turned from the phone. "Come on, Mitch," she said. "I'm hogging it."

Reluctantly Mitch moved to the den. "Hello," he said softly.

"Hello, Mitch."

There was a short silence and Mitch said, "I didn't know if you were home or not. I . . . How's everything going?"

"Fine. And you?" There was a coolness in the throaty voice, but a

loneliness too. Mitch wanted her, suddenly, very strongly . . . to talk to, to be near. "Sue? Would you . . . like to come up?"

There was a long silence. "You're still going to fly it?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Mitch."

Slowly he replaced the phone. He saw Marilyn, clearing dishes, glance at him curiously. They had their coffee, but something had gone out of the evening. Mitch left early for his room at the Yucca Inn.

RON EBERLY left for the city to confer with an instructor he had known at Cal Tech. So the studying ended, and Mitch lapsed into apathy. He would stay in his room, reading a detective novel, until hunger drove him to breakfast. Then he would go to the hangar and wander desolately into the flight office, then move to the ready-room to leaf through magazines and gossip lethargically with Stace. Later he would drive to the Officers' Club and consider a lonely evening.

The days dragged leadenly. The week-end approached, and Mitch for the first time for years had not the faintest plan for it. He asked Zeke Gresham to go skin-diving, but Zeke, busy putting his article together, regretfully declined. Not wanting to dive alone, he impulsively, early Saturday, headed his car east and fled to Las Vegas. After losing two hundred dollars at the tables, he was back in Palmdale by Sunday afternoon. But the depression that haunted him was as heavy as ever. That night even his trick of relaxation failed to put him to sleep. Finally, towards dawn, slumber found him. But in a few short hours he was awake again.

The following morning Mitch lounged in the ready-room, leafing through the file of flight reports on the twelve flights of the X-Fr8. They represented a record of every mannerism that he had found, every trait he had uncovered in the aircraft. Stace was getting dressed for a flight. He glanced over. "You so bored you're reading your own dope over again?"

"If we spent as much time in the air as we do dictating reports, we'd probably know more about the care and feeding of aeroplanes." Mitch regarded the file distastefully. It was a forlorn hope, this search through

his own reports for a hint. "How are you coming with Kalart's Package for Paralyzed Pilots?"

Stace shook his head. "The thing's incredible. I've been shooting *landings* with it the last few hops. I swear, Mitch, if they refine this auto-pilot any more they just won't need us."

"Science is wonderful," Mitch said dryly. "But do you really feel that thing's worth spending your honeymoon with?"

Mitch regretted the words as soon as he said them. Stace's eyes hardened. "Just what did you mean by that?"

"Nothing, Stace. Gee, take it easy."

Stace faced him. "Mitch, you ought to get in a little flight time in an F-80 or go and play golf or something. You look like hell."

"Thanks," said Mitch, returning to his file.

He had been reading for perhaps an hour when he sensed it. He looked up. The clerical sounds from behind the plywood wall separating ready-room and flight office were suddenly absent. A stillness, a tension, seemed to steal through the partition. He was half out of his seat when he heard the howl of the crash siren and the shriek of fire trucks splitting the desert air. He swung down the passageway and into the flight office. The engineers stood frozen round the radio. He asked Vickie sharply, "Stace?" She nodded. He sprinted down the stairs. Brock Stevenson saw him. "What is it, Mitch?"

Mitch, on his way out of the cavernous door, yelled, "Stace."

Without a word they dashed for the Norco flight-line truck. Brock slid behind the wheel. Mitch dived in beside him and flicked the radio to the emergency channel. Then they were roaring across the ramp to follow the crash vehicles pouring from the operations hangar a mile away. Only then did Brock ask, "What happened?"

"I don't know. But it's Stace. Wait. . ."

From the radio a terse voice crackled, "Edwards Tower, this is Air Force Jet 423 again. I've spotted a chute! About eight miles north-east of the crash site. Yeah, it's a chute."

"Thank God," breathed Brock.

"Wait," murmured Mitch. They heard the radio again. "Air Force 423, Edwards Tower. What is the chute's altitude?"

"This is 423. I estimate altitude about eighteen thousand. Over."

"Eighteen *thousand*," exclaimed Mitch.

"Understand eighteen thousand," answered the tower. Then "423, did you pick up his last transmission?"

"This is 423. Affirmative. He said he couldn't overpower his autopilot. Said if he could slow down he'd eject. Then I read: 'Can't slow down. Going to eject anyway. I'm at Mach two. . . .'"

"Oh, my God," Mitch moaned. "Oh, my God."

Brock pointed across the field. The line of red crash trucks was streaking out on to Rogers Dry Lake past a smoking pyre on the lake bed. As they watched, two of the fire trucks cut off at an angle towards the greasy orange flames. The rest of the train shot across the flat plain to the north-east. Brock followed.

Then Mitch saw the chute. It was a tiny white speck in the deep desert sky. Circling high above it was an F-100.

"Brock," he said dismally. "I think he's had it. It's twelve thousand feet now, easy. Think what he started at."

"He has a bail-out bottle. . . ."

Mitch was about to cry. "Nuts," he said. "You think he stayed conscious in a Mach-two ejection? Who you trying to fool?" Brock was silent. "Doesn't that project rate a chute with a pressure release?" asked Mitch. "How come it opened so soon, that high?"

"I don't know," Brock said. "Those things'll fail, I guess."

"Sure," Mitch growled. "The poor guy has to eject and then the chute pops at twenty or thirty thousand and he strangles on the way down." A useless, helpless rebellion at all the optimistic devices built by earthbound engineers took hold of Mitch. "They never ought to let a piece of gear go into production until the egghead that designed it tests it out."

"Take it easy, Mitch."

Mitch stared at the tiny white umbrella nearing the earth. For a terrorized moment he thought that the wind would carry it away into the boulder-strewn foothills bordering Rogers Lake. He watched the dark, helpless bundle swing sickeningly under the canopy, falling, falling. He could only control his frenzy by reminding himself that

surely Stace was dead, had died of anoxia, of lack of oxygen, in the freezing void five miles above the desert.

When he saw his best friend strike the concrete-hard lake bed limply in a puff of dust, he grunted as if he had been struck.

"At least he hit the lake bed," said Brock bleakly.

"Like a rock," Mitch grated.

The canopy fluttered, blossomed in the wind. Then an Air Force car shot into the sphere of silk, collapsing it. The other vehicles lurched to a stop in a semicircle, the last of the sirens growling into silence.

Seconds later Mitch and Brock shouldered through the crowd.

Stace lay in a strangely crumpled attitude. His G-suit was tattered from the buffeting of the ejection, and his left arm was twisted beneath him. Beneath his chin, the strap from his crash helmet had stripped the skin as it was whipped from his head. An Air Force medical orderly knelt beside him, pressing an oxygen mask to his bleeding nose and mouth. Stace's face was a purple, twisted mass.

A car drew into the circle, and a young doctor wearing major's leaves moved swiftly to the body. The doctor knelt by the orderly. The orderly stood up, moving away. Mitch grasped his arm. "He still alive?"

The orderly nodded briefly. "He's still bleeding."

A wild hope plucked at Mitch's heart. "Is he going to live?"

The orderly shook his head. "What do you think? You seen him bleeding from the mouth? He's all torn up inside."

In a daze Mitch watched them roll Stace's body on to a stretcher and load it into the ambulance. His knees felt as if they were about to give way. There was a weird, high-pitched whistling in his ears. In a daze he felt Brock's hands under his arms and sensed that he was being shoved back towards the pick-up truck. Then he was sitting in the truck, with Brock forcing his head between his legs. As the blood returned to his brain full consciousness came with it.

"I'm O.K.," he said "I'm all right." He sat up and wiped his brow. "Heat exhaustion," he said briefly.

Brock nodded. "We might as well head back."

As they pulled out of the circle of cars, Mitch watched the ambulance moving away. The crowd was breaking up. Two of the men on the

crash crew glanced at Mitch. When one of them, wearing an asbestos suit, caught Mitch's eye he looked away guiltily. Hot shame at his weakness climbed Mitch's throat. "All right, let's go," he said. "What are we waiting for?"

Rumbling back, they passed half a mile from a column of smoke that marked Stace's plane. Over an area of perhaps two city blocks lay bits and pieces of the shattered aircraft. The lip of the crater near the fire trucks showed where the main body of the wreckage was buried. Mitch shuddered. Brock jerked his head towards the wreckage. "Thank God he didn't stay with that."

Mitch shrugged. "What difference would it make? If he lives he'll never be the same." Then, desolately, "But he won't live."

VICKIE WAS standing outside the flight office. "They phoned, Mitch. They've taken him to the Air Force Hospital." There was genuine anguish in her eyes. "And he'd just got married, hadn't he?"

"Yeah." Mitch started to enter the flight office.

"It's a mess in there," said Vickie. "Mel Kalart—oh, Mitch, I never saw a man cry before. He's off his head."

"Brother," Mitch said. "That's all we need round here."

Round Kalart's desk clustered the auto-pilot engineer's assistants, awkwardly trying to calm him. He sat stiffly, his face white, obviously in shock. One of the men leaned forward and offered him a paper cup of water. With a spasmodic jerk he slashed it aside. "Why couldn't he overpower it?" he asked loudly. "It's built to be over-ridden." He looked up at his assistant. "You know that, Mike. It's built to be over-ridden, isn't it?"

The assistant nodded. "Come on, Mel. Let me take you home." Kalart shook his head stubbornly.

Avoiding the group, Mitch stuck his head into Haskel's office. Mitch realized that the man was actually, not for appearance's sake but genuinely, working.

"I hate to disturb you, Lou," he said coldly, "but you seem to be the only guy round here that isn't blowing his top. Has anyone called Stace's wife?"

Haskel swung round. "I didn't know he was married. I thought he lived with you."

"Well, that answers my question. Nobody's told her."

Haskel shook his head. "It's Kalart's job."

Mitch stared at him. "Have you seen Kalart?"

Lou nodded. "He's too excitable for a field job like this." The flaccid face wore a look of helpful concern. "Well, Mitch, anything I can do"

Mitch stared. "All I want, Lou, is to use your telephone. I can't call her from out there."

"Sure, Mitch, sure."

The engineer got up and, with surprising delicacy, left the office. Mitch looked after him.

Then he heard Marilyn's voice and forgot everything but the necessity of averting her panic.

"Marilyn, this is Mitch."

She seemed pleased. "Mitch! Where have you been? Was my cooking that bad?"

"Marilyn." He plunged in. "Stace had to eject."

There was a shocked silence. "Eject? You mean——"

"Bail out. Leave the plane. Can you come out to the base?"

"Is he all right?"

"They're checking him at the base hospital. Can you get a car? I'll meet you there."

Her voice rose. "I have my own car. Can I get through the gate? Is he all right? Where's the hospital? He's all right, isn't he, Mitch? Can I get through the gate?"

"I'll call the gate. Now, Marilyn, don't speed. It won't make any difference. I'll see you at the hospital. O.K.?"

The phone clicked in his ear.

THE FAIR, curly-haired major he had seen at the lake sat behind his desk, immaculate now in starched white. Mitch sat opposite him, waiting for Marilyn to leave Stace's side.

"They were just married three weeks ago, you know, Doctor. Before

she comes back to us in here could you tell me what you think?"

The flight surgeon's voice was dry and factual. "Well, he's got a dislocated shoulder and a bad laceration from his chute harness and crash helmet. He obviously has severe internal injuries and I think his kidneys are damaged. He almost lost his left eye, probably from the shock of the chute opening."

"Why did it open so quick?"

The major shrugged. "Anything mechanical can fail. Well, as you know, he's in shock. And of course you know the main trouble."

"Anoxia," Mitch said bitterly.

The major nodded. Mitch looked at him squarely. "Suppose he lived. Would it"

"Affect his brain?" The surgeon rubbed his jaw. "I couldn't say. Right now, if we can just keep him alive it'll be enough."

"Why keep him alive if he's going to end up as a dribbling idiot?"

The surgeon looked at him coldly. From a door marked EMERGENCY ROOM Marilyn emerged. Her eyes were unnaturally bright. The doctor told her that everything that could be done would be done, to leave her telephone number at the admission desk. Mitch stood up to follow her from the room. The doctor held up a finger.

"Mr Westerly? I'd—I'd keep a sharp eye on that girl. She's close to hysteria. Is there a neighbour or somebody who could——?"

"I'll get somebody," murmured Mitch. He looked into the major's face, and saw that behind the professional veil lurked real concern. "I know you'll do all you can, Doctor," he said.

The flight surgeon smiled. "Thanks," he said. "Thanks a lot."

As MITCH drove along the sweep of the desert highway, Marilyn chattered incessantly.

"I don't think the nurse noticed it, Mitch, but he did wake up. He *did*. I think he recognized me. I really think he did."

"That so?" Mitch asked dully.

"It really is. Now will they keep him there in that Air Force hospital, or do I have to find a place in a civilian hospital?"

"They'll keep him there, Marilyn. Don't worry about it."

"He looked so He looked so" Her body was suddenly racked with sobs.

"Now, Marilyn," begged Mitch "Please"

She sniffled and sat up straighter. "I'm not going to cry. Don't worry." She sat staring primly ahead, and Mitch knew that he must quickly get someone to stay with her. The slightest touch would send her spinning into hysteria.

"Mitch? Did you see Stace before his hop this morning?"

He glanced at her. "Yes," he said cautiously. "In the locker-room."

"Did he seem all right?" Mitch remembered the anger in Stace's eyes when he had mentioned the honeymoon. "Yes," he said. "He seemed O.K."

"What did you talk about?"

"Oh, I don't remember. Your honeymoon, for one thing." And then an effort to divert her: "You must have had a wonderful time."

"Yes?" She laughed a little tinnily. "Is that why he came back a week early?"

Mitch drove in silence. "Oh, Mitch," Marilyn cried suddenly. "What's wrong with me? What's wrong with me?"

This is it, thought Mitch, the breaking point, and here I am ten miles from nowhere in the desert with her. "Nothing, Marilyn," he said soothingly. "Take it easy. You'll be home in ten minutes."

"My father used to tell me how pretty I was, and how some day somebody would take me away from him, and I'd say 'never.' And he'd say he'd come to see that I was all right. Only he died first. . . ."

Mitch glanced at her. Her head was back now against the seat, and her eyes were half closed.

"And Stace did take me away, only . . . only" She took a shuddering breath. "But, oh, Mitch, I love him so much anyway. I wanted to tell him how much I loved him but he just lay there. Oh, Mitch, if he dies I'll die too. I will, I will! Because last night— You see— Oh, it's all my fault."

The ride from Edwards to Palmdale was the longest Mitch had ever taken in his life. And when he drew up before the sparkling new home, he knew what he must do.

SUE WAS packing her overnight bag for the Chicago run when the telephone rang. When she heard Mitch's voice, for a moment she stood rigid, and then she sat on the bed. "Yes?"

"Sue, something happened here. I'll have to talk fast because Marilyn's in the bedroom."

Sue's heart lurched. "Is it Stace?"

"He ejected this morning. At Mach two. I don't know if he's going to make it or not."

"Oh, Mitch! And Marilyn! That poor little thing."

"I've just brought her back from the hospital. That's what I wanted to ask you. She's about to crack up. I don't think I can handle it. She doesn't know anybody here yet, and——"

Sue glanced at her watch. "I was *just* leaving on a flight, Mitch. I'll call Crew Schedules and get them to fill in with a reserve stewardess."

"Could you, Sue?"

"Yes. I'll start as soon as I change."

There was a moment of silence. "As soon as you can, Sue." He gave her the address. Then he said softly, "I need you, too."

Slowly she replaced the phone. Despite herself, a glow slipped through her body.

Two hours later, hot and grimy from the long desert ride, she slid her convertible against the kerb, glancing at the address she had written down. The front door opened and Mitch stood in the doorway. He looked tired. She hurried up the path.

He hugged her swiftly. "Thanks, kid. She's in her bedroom. She said she'd go in and lie down but she's pacing the floor. She won't even take a drink."

"How's Stace?" she asked.

"The hospital will call here if there's any change. It's bad, Sue. You might as well get ready for it."

She nodded. "All right, Mitch. I'll be ready."

"And if you do hear anything," he said, "I'll be at the Inn."

His lips touched her forehead and then he was gone, swinging down the path. She found there were tears in her eyes, tears, she knew, of love for Mitch as much as worry for Marilyn.

CHAPTER 6

OU HASKEL stood up as Tony Carlos and Pete Nesbit entered his office. "Nice flight, Tony?" asked Haskel. "How about some coffee?"

Tony Carlos smiled. "Thanks."

Was the smile as warm as usual? Maybe asking the pair to Edwards had been a mistake. He rang for Vickie, and she came in with a tray with three paper cups of coffee. Tony followed her out of the door with his eyes. "Gee, Lou, you guys sure have the pretty girls up here. Well, to get to the root of things, what's on your mind?"

Haskel blew on his coffee thoughtfully. "Well, I got to thinking about Stace Arnold's accident yesterday, and it occurred to me that we ought to be looking ahead. You know how Westerly feels about that extra telemetering equipment." Haskel looked out of the window. "What's his reaction going to be? The only guy checked out in that plane besides him is dying. Frankly, he's got us by the short hair. What's he going to ask for?"

Nesbit looked at him distastefully. "I'll bite. What *is* he going to ask for?"

"I think he's going to ask us to take out the black boxes."

"Has he mentioned it?"

"Well, no. But, confidentially, I've been hearing things about him. In fact, from what I've heard, he's scared to death."

Nesbit frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, to start with, I had a talk with Al Lipscomb a while back. A little while ago Westerly was flying co-pilot with Al in the *Blue Beetle*. He fell asleep, and Al let a tank run dry to test the gauge. When the engines quit Al said Westerly pretty near tore out the gas selector in his excitement."

"For heaven's sake, Lou," Pete Nesbit said, "any pilot would do that if he didn't know it was coming. I'd say it just showed good reactions."

"I think, for a test pilot, it shows he's too nervous. Then yesterday, they tell me, he almost fainted when he saw Stace on the lake bed."

"Stace is his best friend," Nesbit said. "Why shouldn't he be shocked?"

Haskel shrugged. "O.K., O.K. I just think he's *too* shocked. What I think is, he's going to try to make this hop as easy for himself as he can. I think he's going to ask us to take the telemetering equipment out of that plane."

Tony Carlos held up his hand. "Just a minute, fellows. There's a misunderstanding, and it's my fault." He paused. "The Old Man got back the other day, you know. He read Westerly's report on the yaw on Flight Number Eleven. And, Lou, he read your addendum."

Lou's heart thumped. He wished suddenly that he had passed the flight report on without the addition. "Yes? What did he think?"

Carlos looked at him wryly. "Frankly, Lou, he didn't like it. His feeling is— Well, he thinks it's a waste of money to hire the type of test pilots we do if we're going to ignore their instinctive findings."

Sudden anger flowed into Lou's chest. "Well," he said, his voice tight, "he certainly doesn't subscribe to the theory that the centre of gravity moves about in flight, does he?"

"He didn't say. He did say that we had to keep our minds open in the area of speed and altitude that we're embracing. Yesterday he read the report on Flight Number Twelve, and now he's inclined to believe Westerly."

"I see." Lou drummed the table top. "And the only way we find out who's right is if we can get Westerly to fly this plane with the added weight and to leave his feet on the pedals through the controllability phase. Right?"

Tony Carlos said, "I guess so. But there's the matter of the commitment Mitch made to fly the telemetering equipment on the Mach-eight flight if he got the extra hop. The Old Man says that Westerly isn't to be held to that obligation."

Lou's heart sank. Nesbit said, "That sounds like him. I'm glad to hear it."

Carlos went on, "Frankly, he *would* like to see the telemetering equipment carried because he knows it's essential. But—and he emphasized this very carefully—his paramount interest is in the safety of

the pilot. If Westerly doesn't think it's safe, he's not to be forced to carry the telemetering."

"That's very interesting," said Lou, dull anger getting the better of his political acumen. "But if he doesn't carry the telemetering equipment, how are we going to write a decent proposal for the vehicle contract? We lose the bid on that, and we've had it."

"His paramount interest is in the pilot's safety," Carlos said again, his eyes hard. Lou looked away.

"I understand."

"And you'll be sure Westerly understands too, right?" Carlos said.

"Yeah," he said impatiently. "I'll take care of it."

The smile was back on Tony Carlos's face, and he rose swiftly. "Well, I guess that sews it up."

Lou saw the two men to his door. Then he plodded back to his desk, flicked the intercom and said, "When Westerly gets to the hangar send him in here." He sat down. A burning wrath simmered in his soul. "They're all out to get me," he murmured, "every damned one of them. Well, I'm right. They'll find out I'm right."

MITCH DROVE by the hospital and was allowed to look in on Stace in his room. There had been no change, and there was an air of pessimism throughout the ward.

When he arrived at the hangar, he found Brock Stevenson standing by the Big X. In the jumble of equipment beside the plane stood the two pieces of telemetering equipment. Brock looked at him quizzically. "Mitch? You know, I'll bet if you groused once more about this gear they'd yank it out."

"After all the squabbling? No, Brock. I don't think so."

When he signed in at the flight office Vickie spoke to him. "Lou wanted to see you, Mitch."

"Great," Mitch said. "A lovely way to start the day."

"He started it with a conference with Tony Carlos and Pete Nesbit."

Mitch raised his eyebrows. "They're up here?"

"They were."

He knocked on Lou Haskel's door. "Did you want to see me?"

The engineer swivelled on his chair. "Yeah." He jerked his head towards a seat. "I thought we ought to have a talk about what you intend to do on Thursday's flight. Now, your procedures are all laid out in Eberly's flight plan. If you hit all your points right, you'll penetrate the controllability barrier at 138,000 feet, going and coming."

"I read it." Mitch waited, knowing this preflight conference was more than that. He probably, he thought, is scared to death I'll insist we yank the telemetering out; but that subject won't come up unless I mention it first. He toyed with the idea of doing so, just to anger Haskel, but decided that the time for such childish pleasures was past.

Haskel cleared his throat. "Now, your report on Flight Plan Number Eleven—the one about the yaw—has been read by the Old Man. And my addendum also. It seems that there's some discussion in the city as to whether you and Nesbit or me and the law of gravity are right."

"Go ahead," Mitch said cautiously. "I'm not following you yet."

"Your report put me in a ridiculous position of being a project head who disagrees with the test pilot below him and with his chief of flight above him." He seemed to have to force the words out. "Now, how are we going to find out who's right? Me or Nesbit?"

So that was it, Mitch thought. Nesbit had decided from the report that there might be truth in his theory; now it was a professional issue, a company issue, between Nesbit and Haskel. And in Haskel's mind at least the Old Man was standing in judgment over their futures. He said, "*I* don't know how we're going to find out, with just one more flight. And *that* for Mach eight. We can't fool about proving or disproving basic theories at that speed."

"Can't we?" Haskel was working himself into a real rage. "Now you've got me and Design in a spot where half the company, the Old Man included, probably thinks we've built an aeroplane that's too unstable to fly if you put a foot on the rudder pedal."

Mitch looked into the angry red eyes, his own wrath rising in him like a storm. "Just what are you suggesting?"

"There's only one way to prove that you didn't induce that yaw yourself. Put your feet on the pedals as you go through the controllability barrier. If it yaws, you're right."

"It yawed at Mach six and it nearly killed me. Now you want me to try it at Mach eight. You, my friend, can go straight to hell."

Haskel shrugged "That's what I thought you'd say. A sixteen-million-dollar package left with one string untied. They tell me round here you want to fly the big one if we can get the contract. And yet you're too cautious to get us what we need on this one. What would you do in a space vehicle?"

Mitch stood tautly before him. *Don't blow*, he told himself. *You've taken it up to now. It's only two more days.* The engineer droned on, his voice turning calm and reflective. "Out of all the guys who wanted to fly this plane, we had to pick one that's yellow."

Mitch reached towards Haskel, about to seize his lapels. He forced himself to stop. Why was he letting this neurotic goad him to violence?

He knew why—because in his own fibre lodged a tiny doubt: *Was Haskel right?* With the knowledge came a certain control.

He looked at the puffed features. Haskel suddenly reminded him of a dead grouper he had seen on the beach, bloated and popeyed. And for a moment he thought he detected the same odour that had wafted over the sand. Suddenly he wanted to laugh. "Haskel," he said almost pleasantly, "you stunk. Physically, you stink. Did you know that?"

Then, feeling better than he had for days, he left the office.

HE WAS STANDING by the water-cooler, washing the taste of anger from his mouth, when Ron Eberly found him. "What's the matter, Mitch? You look like you've been doing push-ups in the desert."

Mitch laughed. "Your boss. Honest, some day I'm going to kill him."

Ron grinned sympathetically. "Did he tell you about the telemetering?"

"No." Mitch raised his eyebrows. "What about it?"

"The Old Man doesn't want you saddled with it unless you think it's safe. He says nobody's to hold you to that promise you made about carrying it."

"No kidding?" Mitch stared at him. "And Haskel knew this?"

Ron nodded. "He's supposed to have told you."

Mitch shook his head. "That son of a so-and-so. It doesn't seem

possible." He faced Eberly. "Ron, I need some real level dope."

"Sure, Mitch."

His mouth was dry as he forced the question out. "How important is that gear?"

Eberly looked uncomfortable. "Very important, Mitch."

"I don't mean just for getting the vehicle contract. I don't mean just to snow the Air Force with extra data. I mean for the fundamental purpose of the project; to get data we'll need to build a vehicle."

Ron's eyes held his. "Essential, Mitch. Absolutely essential."

Mitch faced him desolately. His head ached and he wanted to be alone.

As he passed the Big X on the hangar floor, Brock Stevenson halted him cheerfully. "Ron told me about the Old Man's decision on this telemetering gear. How about that, buddy?"

"How soon do you have to know whether I'm hauling it?"

"Heck, I haven't reinstalled it yet."

"I mean, if I decide to take it."

"To *take* it? Oh, Mitch! *Why?*"

"When is the last time I can give you the word?"

Brock spread his hands "Tomorrow afternoon. But I hope——"

"I'll let you know," Mitch said. "I'll let you know by then." Then he was into the harsh desert sunlight. The familiar smell of sage and dust and jet fuel was bitter in his nostrils.

IN THE flight surgeon's room, the cool young major nodded when Mitch asked if there had been any improvement. "I think he'll live. He may lose some vision in that left eye, and he'll have a trick shoulder the rest of his life, but I think he'll live."

Hope thawed Mitch's depression. "What about his mental condition?"

"Frankly, I don't see how his brain tissue escaped damage, but he's had at least one period of lucidity, and I think he's O.K." The doctor paused. "You're a test pilot. Do you think he might have thought fast enough, have been calm enough, to take a few deep breaths before he ejected? To hyperventilate himself for the trip down, in case he lost his mask?"

Mitch stared at the doctor. Pride caught at his throat. It was an

incredible theory, but he knew almost certainly that the flight surgeon was right. "That's our boy Stace," he said happily.

The doctor nodded. "Well, I'm glad you guys can outwit a gadget some of the time."

"Some of us can," Mitch said. "Some of the time."

In Stace's room, Marilyn was standing by Stace's bed, while Sue sat looking out of the window. Mitch moved to Sue. She smiled. "Mitch, I think he's going to be all right. I just *feel* it somehow."

"The doctor does too."

Marilyn looked up. "Stace was talking to me a minute ago, Mitch. Really he was."

As if he had heard his name, Stace opened his visible eye. "Hi, buddy," Mitch heard him murmur faintly. Then: "You fly it yet?"

Mitch shook his head, and the eye closed. He stood awkwardly over the bed for a long moment. Then Marilyn kissed Stace's bandaged forehead. They passed outside, and Mitch drove them home in Sue's car. On the way back Marilyn began to cry softly, but there were relief and release in the sobs now.

"When he was awake," she said, "I told him how much I loved him. I told him and he understood." Sue laid a hand on her arm.

They dropped Marilyn off at home and Mitch drove to the Yucca Inn with Sue. He parked under the portico. Sue looked at him almost desperately. "Mitch, I have to start back to Los Angeles."

He looked at the firmly rounded chin and the straight nose and suddenly his longing for her was so forceful that it lay between them like a tangible thing. He shook his head. "Lunch," he said shakily. "Come on."

They sat at a tiny table in the cool dining-room, looking out at the patio through french windows. They had a leisurely meal, but the turmoil within Mitch wrecked his appetite and he could only toy with a salad. When the waitress took away their plates, he began to talk. Driven by some strange sense of urgency, he told her of the grey weeks since they had seen each other. Some time during the afternoon, he ordered port and the two of them sipped the tawny wine as he talked.

He told her of how he had nearly fainted over Stace on the lake bed,



and she squeezed his hand. He told her of the special trip that Nesbit and Carlos had made that morning, and that it was to be his choice whether or not he would carry the telemetering equipment. He rambled on, unable to dam the rush of words now that he had her with him.

"The whole thing gives me a pain. Nobody cared a hoot what I thought until it turned out I was the only guy left that could fly this beast. Then the minute my best friend clobbers himself everybody acts like I'm a tin god."

"Oh, Mitch—don't you think they just reconsidered and decided that your safety was more important?"

"The Old Man, maybe. Not Haskel, that's for sure."

He sipped his wine and told her of the scene in Haskel's office. "Haskel's in a bad spot, Sue. He's afraid I won't test his theory. I think he's afraid that if I don't, he'll lose the chance to be project head of the Vehicle Programme."

Sue glanced at him keenly. "But you're not going to, are you? You're not carrying the extra weight?"

"That's a different matter, Sue. That's essential stuff—apparently as important as the plane itself. Don't worry. I won't stick my neck out."

"You're *not* carrying it?"

He looked away. "I haven't decided."

"Mitch!" she flared. "That's what I mean! They're all sitting on the ground with their fool charts waiting for you to . . . to clobber yourself to prove or disprove some stupid theory that doesn't make any difference to anybody but an engineer!"

"It's a lot more important than that, Sue. People have risked their tails for less essential data than this. It's something we have to know if we're going on to space flight."

There were tears in her eyes. "*Damn* space flight," she cried. "What difference does it make? Why does it have to be you? That's why I left you, can't you see? And that's why I'm going back to Los Angeles tonight!" She started to rise.

Mitch closed his fingers on her arm. "No, you're not." She faced him for a long moment. Then, her eyes wet with tears, she shook her head. "No," she said desolately. "You're right. I'm not."

He stared at her as if he had never seen her before, while a strange exultation grew within him until he felt that he would burst.

SUE AWAKENED in golden sunlight. Next to her, Mitch lay on his back, his deep chest rising and falling in steady rhythm. For a long while she lay on her side, studying his face. Once he had told her the history of some of his scars, and she remembered it.

She tenderly traced the scar above his eye. What had it been? A "cold-cat" shot, whatever that was, from a carrier. A crash at take-off into the waters off Iwo Jima and a quick rescue in a destroyer, and, Brock had told her, another flight on the same day. And his nose had been broken the time he bailed out of the stricken Norco Navy bomber over Santa Monica Bay; he never knew how, but broken just the same.

Suddenly she realized that she was memorizing his features. Fiercely she kissed him awake. He smiled, and stretched luxuriously. "What time is it?"

She looked at her watch. "Mitch! It's a quarter to ten. Aren't you supposed to be at the hangar or somewhere?"

He shook his head. "Forget it. Honey, why didn't somebody tell me about this?"

Her heart thumped happily. "What?"

"Love." He was looking down at her. As he spoke, she felt a stronger union with him than she had ever felt before. And her heart ached as if the joy in it had burst its bounds.

"Sue, I love you. I have for a long time. Then I got scared that you might be hurt again. But last night I knew I had to tell you. I love you so much I can hardly stand it."

Suddenly she understood and knew that she must quiet him before she burst into tears. She placed a finger over his mouth. "I love you too, Mitch. And I think I know why you wouldn't tell me. But—somehow I can't bear to speak of it. Can you understand that?"

He shook his head. "No. But I do love you. More than life. If the whole world blew up today, I'd feel I'd never missed a thing."

She felt her eyes fill with tears. "Oh, Mitch! My darling . . ."

He went on. "For months I've felt we were more man and wife than

lots of couples. Now I want us to get married. After tomorrow's flight. In Mexico, maybe. Or"—his eyes lit up—"we could hop to Las Vegas and get married today. Sue?"

She shook her head wordlessly. "You . . . oh, you idiot! You're—you're not asking me," she choked. "You're . . . *telling* me."

"Shall I get on one knee?" He slid to the rug, kneeling. "Marry me? O.K.?"

"O.K.," she said tightly.

His face turned serious. "Let's do it today."

The room seemed suddenly darker. "Why? Why today?"

"I don't know. How about it?"

"No, Mitch. That's silly. Any other time, but not today."

Sue held him a long while. Her heart began to pound. *I have to tell him now, right now.* . . . Waveringly she said, "Mitch, there's something you have to know before we even talk of getting married. I should have told you before, but—well, I didn't."

"You have insanity in the family! Your cousin has two heads!"

"Stop it. I mean it."

"What is it, Sue?"

She took a deep breath. "I'm pregnant, Mitch."

She forced herself to look at him. When she did her heart lurched wildly. He was shaking his head, looking down at her. "How pregnant?" he asked inscrutably.

"It's total," she said, half laughing and half crying.

"I mean, how long?"

"Three months," she said.

He shook his head wonderingly. "And you didn't even hint at it. Why not?"

"Oh, Mitch, I don't really know."

"You didn't want to tell me before the flight. You were afraid it would shake me up. That's it, isn't it?"

She nodded. "That's it."

"Sue," his voice caught. "I don't know what I ever did to deserve anybody like you. But all I want to do from here on is to make you happy."

She touched her hand to his cheek. "And I don't even know if you want children."

"More than anything in the world." He was deeply serious. "All my life I've wanted them. I never told you, but all my life."

"It may be embarrassing. Premature, so to speak."

"Nuts," Mitch said scornfully. "Come on I'm starved. Besides, I want to tell somebody. Real quick."

"Mitch! Not about the *baby*!"

"O.K. But about our getting married, anyway."

In a moment he was in the shower, singing at the top of his lungs, "*I'm getting married in the morning . . . Ding! dong! the bells are gonna chime. . .*"

Sue lay listening, tears of happiness trickling to the pillow.

THEY SEATED themselves at their table. "What I've been missing," he murmured to her. Suddenly he saw Zeke, looking a little worn, walk into the dining-room. Bursting with the desire to tell someone he signalled him. He pulled up a chair for him and Gresham sat down.

"Shall I tell him?"

He saw in her eyes a fleeting reluctance. *She knows he's half in love with her himself—she knows it will hurt him*, he thought.

Then Sue nodded, and Mitch said, "We're getting married."

He had been right. A twitch at the corner of Zeke's mouth betrayed him, but he recovered instantly. He grabbed Mitch's arm and squeezed it. "That's *wonderful* When is it going to be?"

"We haven't worked it out," Sue said.

Zeke signalled the waitress. "I want some champagne. In an ice bucket."

"For breakfast?" Sue gaped incredulously.

"Of course for breakfast," said Zeke. The startled waitress headed for the unmanned bar and returned with a bottle, and Zeke uncorked it. He placed a Manila envelope on the table. "First and second instalments," he said to Mitch. "And what an ending when we close it with the wedding."

They toasted the bride, and Zeke said, "I'll give this to you to look

over, Mitch. I'll finish the third instalment today. Who won the telemetering battle? Are you carrying it?"

Mitch saw Sue's eyes on his face. "I don't know." Clumsily he picked up the envelope. "Could I look this over before I go to the hangar? I'm awfully anxious to read it."

Zeke nodded. They finished breakfast, and Sue left with Zeke to buy a bathing suit so that she could swim while he was gone.

Mitch sat by the pool, engrossed in Zeke's article. The piece was like a cool breeze through a smoke-filled room. It was written with clarity and neatness, by an intelligence with fantastic ability to select technical data and mould it into understandable form. Not a line was hazy; not a fact obscure. More, it was the story of a man, himself, done with an understated sensitivity and perception that were truly remarkable.

When Mitch had finished reading it, it was as if from some distant height he had observed his whole life. Zeke Gresham had captured his motivation, the dream of conquering space, and had set it without ostentation into words. The theme of his and every flyer's desire—as Zeke quoted Shelley, *The desire of the moth for the star*—underlay each sentence, each paragraph. And because Zeke had used Mitch only as a symbol—a living one, but a symbol; any other test pilot could have been used equally well—Mitch had no fear that anyone, even fellow airmen, would seriously criticize the concentration of the piece on himself.

When he had finished, he saw with surprise that Zeke and Sue were back, Sue in a new swimming suit, watching him with amusement from across the pool. He crossed the patio. "Zeke, it's the best piece of factual writing I've ever read. I wouldn't change a word."

"Well, thanks, Mitch." Gresham seemed sincerely pleased. "I hoped you'd like it."

Mitch shook his head at Sue. "Honey, when I finished that piece I thought somebody had been—talking to God about me, I guess." He shook his head again. "It's a terrific piece of work, Zeke. Thanks. I'll be back in a couple of hours, honey. You read it. It's great."

"Well, look who it's about."

"It isn't like that at all. It even hints—of course this is ridiculous—it even hints that I'm not perfect."

"I'll light fire to it."

"He's reached the core of our whole space programme. The guy's a genius."

She put her hand in his and walked with him to his car. Then, sitting by the swimming-pool, she read Zeke's article.

"How will it end, Zeke?" she said as she handed it back to him.

His dark eyes burnt into hers. "It will end with a successful flight tomorrow. And the last paragraph will be a simple, unadorned description of your wedding."

"Will it?" Sue was suddenly tired, and she lay back with her eyes closed. "Zeke, I think that's truly a work of art."

"If it's as good as you say, Sue, it's because my heart was in it. It's a fascinating subject, and he's a fascinating guy."

"He is that."

He put the article into the Manila envelope. "Sue, there's one thing."
"Yes?"

"If I'd thought that laying out his basic motivation—letting him read that he's essentially an explorer shooting for the unknown—would sway him towards overextending himself one bit, I'd never have let him read it."

"You mean that painting him as an idealist might make him risk his life?"

"It wouldn't, would it?"

"Of course not. Because he is one. He'll do it, if he feels it's necessary, regardless of what you write." She added sadly, "Or what I say."

"Well, he wears competence like a suit of armour. You can see it."

"So did Stace." She drew in her breath and sat up. "You told me once that the number of years that one lived was relative. Remember? That some people live more deeply in a short time than others?"

He nodded.

She said, "In the last twenty-four hours I've had a hundred years of happiness." She jumped to her feet and dived cleanly into the pool.

MITCH STOOD on the veranda outside the flight office, waiting for Vickie to bring him tomorrow's flight plan to O.K. He looked down

at the Big X, almost deserted now save for Brock. Her skin had been replaced except for one panel. Below the hole in her fuselage lay the two pieces of telemetering gear.

The moment of decision was rushing towards him. Helplessly, his hand slapped the iron rail in front of him. *Is it my fault*, he thought. *that the stupid plane isn't designed to carry it?* No, he answered himself. *It's not my fault, and the Old Man himself doesn't expect me to do it, and I have another life to think of now. Two more lives.*

He heard Brock's footsteps coming down the passageway. "Mitch?"

"Yes." His voice was hollow in his own ears.

"Give me the word and I'll button her up," Brock said. "O K.?"

Something in Mitch screamed silently. *Button it up, then, and get out of my hair. Leave the gear on the ground and the hell with it. Let them get whatever they need off their charts or their slide rules or build another aeroplane to do it.* And he heard Ron Eberly's quiet voice. *Essential, Mitch. Absolutely essential.*

For a long while he stared at the sleek fuselage below them.

"Install them, Brock. Put them back in."

As he said it something twisted and died inside him. Brock's voice was flat, defeated. "Whatever you say, Mitch." His friend turned and walked a few steps. He looked back. "But will you for God's sake stay off the pedals? Will you?"

Mitch didn't answer.

VICKIE JOINED him at the rail, the flight plan on a clip board. "Here you are, Mitch. Notice something?"

He scanned the yellow paper. "I see you've changed the number."

"Lou Haskel signed it and that makes it official. He didn't even notice. So . . . tomorrow's flight is Number Fourteen instead of Thirteen."

Mitch shook his head helplessly, looking into her eyes. "Of all the characters to be superstitious!"

"All women are superstitious, Mitch. I'll bet you that if we called this Flight Number Thirteen, that girl—Sue—would be a stretcher case by the time you got back."

"She's up here, Vickie, you know."

"I heard. I—hope you'll marry her, Mitch." She looked away for a moment. "Mitch?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful. Please, be careful."

Her lips touched his cheek and she moved swiftly back into the flight office.

CHAPTER 7

THE PHONE croaked and Mitch was instantly awake. It had been a moonlit night when last he had opened his eyes, but now the light seeping through the Venetian blinds was tinged with grey. He felt Sue tense beside him. He took the phone from its cradle. "Yes?"

"This is Brock."

"Yeah, Brock." It was an effort, but he got it out. "Everything set?"

"She's checked out, Mitch. It's four o'clock. Reveille." The voice was tired but determinedly cheerful.

Mitch replaced the phone and swung his feet off the bed. Fear began as a knot in his belly. In the grey dawn he shivered.

"Mitch?"

He stood up and stretched to disguise the trembling, but when he answered his teeth chattered and his voice was strangely high. "Hmm?"

"Did it check out?"

"It checked out. Today's the day."

He went to the bathroom and carefully cleaned his teeth. He felt the stubble on his chin and decided to wait until he got back to shave. He dashed cold water on his face and returned to the bedroom. "Well, I ought to be back by noon."

In the grey half-light Sue's face was haggard. She was trembling violently, apparently fighting it. "Honey," he began "What's the matter? Don't be scared—" Then it occurred to him. "This wouldn't be a touch of morning sickness, would it?"

She nodded quickly. "That's it. Have you finished with the bathroom?"

"Yes."

Mitch sat on the bed and drew on his socks. He found himself lost in a dull study, minutes later, with one sock on and the other off, when Sue came back. She stood above him. "Are you all right, Mitch?"

"Yeah. Just thinking."

She was suddenly on her knees by the bed, staring into his eyes. Then she shook her head. "I'll get dressed and go and get coffee with you. I wish I could go to the base."

"You can't, honey. So forget it. And I'm late already—I'll get my coffee at the hangar." He was on his feet, keeping his mind purposely blank, glad to have the automatic things to do—pull on his slacks, cinch his belt, draw on his watch. He started to put on his Navy ring, then surreptitiously placed it back in the ash-tray.

"Why did you do that?" Sue asked from the bed. Her voice had a tinny, hysterical quality.

"I leave it in my locker anyway. Hand gets sweaty. Why?"

"Take it. Please?"

He shrugged. "O.K. But I don't see why——"

"Because you always do!" Her voice cut across the room.

He put on the ring and crossed to the bed. "Well, see you in"—he looked at his watch—"eight hours. Go back to sleep, why don't you?"

She nodded. He kissed her. Her lips were stiff and cold. He left, stepping into the cold desert morning. Then he stopped short, turned and went back, not knowing why. Sue was still sitting on the bed, staring straight ahead. He crossed the room and gently pushed her back against the pillows.

"Sue," he heard himself say, cradling her head in his hand, "you're part of me. We're the same person, Sue, do you understand that?" Roughly he bent over her. Strength poured into his arms and his legs and his back. He grinned down at her. "Do you understand that, Sue? I love you. I *love* you."

She drew a long, sighing breath and suddenly she was clinging to him, trembling. When she relaxed, her face had softened. Two tears trickled down her temples. She smiled, and he knew that he would carry the image of the smile for ever.

"I know, Mitch," she said. "I know."

Then he was out into the chill desert air, climbing into his car, with his heart pounding exultantly.

BUT STANDING with his coffee at his locker in the ready-room, the fear began to return. Next door, above the current sound from the flight office, he could hear Lou Haskel, suddenly booming at some technician for a delay in setting up equipment. Slowly, almost reluctantly, he opened his locker and drew out his flight underwear and pressure suit.

There was a knock at the door and Zeke Gresham entered. Mitch, though ordinarily he disliked visitors before a flight, was glad to see him. "Hi, Zeke," he said. "Sit down. You're up awful early."

"I wouldn't miss the pay-off for the world," Zeke smiled. "What does a man think of before a flight like this?"

Mitch, zipping an ankle on his pressure suit, considered the question. "Right now," he said simply, "I'm scared. Usually I want to get a flight over with. But today"—he checked a zip—"today it seems different. I'm reluctant—really reluctant—to do anything to make this hop proceed. It took me five minutes to get my socks on this morning."

He got up and took his gloves from the locker. He started to take off his ring and put it inside, and then turned to Zeke. "Zeke, how about keeping this ring for me? Until I get down?"

Zeke looked puzzled and then suddenly aware. "Sure, Mitch."

Mitch zipped his flight gloves carefully to the pressure suit. "You know, you sure captivated that gal of mine."

"That's flattering."

"She thinks you're the greatest."

"No," Zeke said softly. "Not the greatest."

Mitch looked deeply into Zeke's probing, strangely gentle eyes. Zeke smiled. He stuck out his hand, and his clasp was firm and warm. "Good luck, Mitch," he said. "See you soon."

Ron Eberly stepped in from the hall. "Mitch, what are you going to do up there?"

Mitch raised his eyebrows. "That's a silly question. Every second of

that flight is planned by eggheaded engineers and you ask me what I'm going to do."

"You're going to stay off the rudders, aren't you?"

Was he, or wasn't he? "Yes. Why?"

"I just wanted to be sure. I didn't want you to feel that you ought to test our theory. Stay off 'em."

Mitch tried to make his voice light. "Look, Ron, don't worry. I'm playing this just as safe as I can."

"Good."

"Although," Mitch said thoughtfully, "it would be nice to know whether a little tap on the rudder will put that monster out of control. Especially for the next guy who tries to fly it."

"You've done everything you could. It's all in the reports."

Mitch grabbed his helmet with the plastic mask. "Yeah. O.K., buddy. Let's go."

They stopped at the flight office, and Lou Haskell moved ponderously from his cubicle, his starchy face damp and shiny. The three of them moved down the long hangar, and Mitch found that another tide of fear was washing over him. This was bad! Fear, to be any good, should be a steady, predictable thing, sensitizing perceptions, speeding reactions. Suppose it was replaced at a crucial moment by the clinging reluctance he had felt at times this morning? As they stepped from the hangar into the dawn, a blue Air Force jeep squeaked up. George Vickers grinned from the passenger seat. "Seems like they scheduled me for chase pilot after all, Westerly. Tomlinson will track you at Salt Lake until you're out of range and I'll pick you up near Vegas at re-entry. Now how could *that* have happened?"

"Beats me," said Mitch happily.

"Well," Vickers said. "I want to keep an eye on your bird for the Air Force. I'm afraid these eggheaded engineers will talk you into going into orbit before we even get our hands on it." Then, suddenly serious, he said. "Now, don't do anything I wouldn't do, you know? O.K.?"

"O.K., Colonel."

Mitch watched the jeep bounce off. Then he climbed into Haskell's company car.

They rode past the parking area to the giant B-58 hugging the Big X to her breast. Mitch started to get out of the car, his mouth dry. Lou looked at him. "Mitch, you going to tap that rudder a little when you get up to speed? You going to try to see if your theory's right?"

Mitch saw Ron shoot his chief an incredulous glance. He felt the blood climbing to his face. "Just what do you mean?"

"Simmer down. I just wanted to know, ahead of time, whether you were going to try the rudder at Mach eight."

"Why? So if this thing got away you'd know I'd been right all along?"

"O.K., Mitch." Haskel studied the palm of his hand. "I just wondered whether the Air Force pilot who flies it next ought to get more dope than we're giving him. The Old Man might wonder too."

"Yeah," Mitch said angrily. "I *heard* about what the Old Man said."

Haskel shrugged. "Regardless of what the Old Man says, or anybody says, we won't know until you test your rudder. That's a fact, and you can't argue with it."

Mitch fought for control. "Look, I'm flying this thing to Mach eight. I'm flying it the safest way I know how. I'm staying off those pedals. Understand?"

Haskel's eyes were unwavering. "It's still a fact, Westerly. It's the only way we'll know."

Mitch started for the plane.

Mitch crouched blindly in the Big X as the Hustler climbed slowly. He heard Wally Marks speaking with the warmth of a man who has put himself in another's place. "It's a beautiful morning, Mitch. Crystal clear."

"Roger. Thanks."

At twenty-eight thousand feet, when Wally contacted the first chase pilot, Mitch was lost again in the strange fog of fear he had felt throughout the morning. He even glanced at the familiar instruments and the panel of warning lights, almost hoping for a red one that would cause the flight to abort. But there was none. He heard Duncan. "Two-minute warning, Mitch."

Automatically he punched the stop-watch in the cockpit. As if in a dream he went through the routine, feeling the tense knot in his belly draw tighter, hearing the sound of his breath fighting the pressure of the oxygen in the system. Now the time was racing, and he heard Duncan's voice, counting coldly at first, and then with excitement as he reached the end: "Ten seconds, nine seconds, eight . . ."

He flicked on the data switch that would send his telemetering information to the ground, that would enable the engineers to learn all from the flight whether he lived or died.

"Seven seconds, six seconds, five seconds . . ."

He had the moment of uncertainty that he always had just before the drop point: what had he forgotten? And this time, with startling clarity, he saw his father catching up with him at the lift of their apartment, holding out his schoolbooks. "Mitch, why don't you just once before you leave a place, wait and ask yourself: 'Now what the devil have I forgotten?'"

"Four seconds, three seconds, two seconds, one second . . ."

At the last moment he had a mad desire to cancel the hop; claim a red light, claim sickness "*Drop!*"

There was a final "clank" and he was dropping down the shaft of light. For a moment he sat frozen in the glaring shock of sunlight. Then he heard Tomlinson's voice crackling through his headset. "You dropped clear. Falling free."

Automatically Mitch reached for the rocket switches. He flicked Number One, flinching as the giant shoves began.

It was Flight Number Twelve over again, but on this drop, with the rocket engines finally blasting full throat for the first time, he was to undergo accelerations that would cram him back into his seat with six times the force of gravity. When engine Number Three lit off, he did not see how he could possibly sustain the added force of Number Four; since he had already flicked its firing stud, he could only sit and wait. Number Four burst into life with a throbbing surge that completely immobilized him. Through roaring ears he heard Tomlinson. "They're all lit, buddy. Give it hell. . ."

He stared at his dials, hypnotized, while his speed increased. He sliced

through the sound barrier almost instantly, and, as the Machmeter slid swiftly towards Mach two, he heard his cabin air-conditioning whine in fierce battle with air friction at the thermal phase. The skin temperature was pushing twelve hundred degrees, near the limit. Seen through the tiny slit windscreen, the nickel-steel skin on the nose was glowing; orange closest to the cockpit, cherry-red near the base of the probe. Was he exceeding his safe Mach at this low altitude? He eased up the nose, almost vertical already. The glow became less bright. He tore his eyes back to the dials before him, and heard himself chanting his speeds to Ground Control: "Mach 3.1, 90,000 feet . . . Mach 4.2, 100,000 feet . . . Mach 5.4, 112,000 feet . . ."

The grinding force of acceleration seemed to build and build, as if a supernatural being had taken over and wildly decided that he would roar ever faster, for ever, through the trackless sky. He felt that if one more iota, one more ounce of thrust were added to the cumulative push, his guts would burst through his back. Pressure-breathing, he fought the oxygen cramming into his lungs. And still the shove increased.

Startlingly, he heard Haskell's voice, fading momentarily but clear: "Project X from Ground Control. Readings?"

Readings, my tail, he wanted to say. *I can hardly breathe.* "Mach 6.8, 125,000 feet." His voice was a strained grunt "Mach 7.1." He was travelling faster than man had ever flown. "128,000 feet"

Through the mental cloudiness that was enveloping him came a warning flash. 128,000 feet In an instant he would be into the controllability phase. He had a decision to make.

His feet . . . He had to decide. Would he try it? His mind cleared. If he did, and the monster threw off his control, what of Sue? And of the tiny life within her? Decide, decide. One little tap of pressure, and they'll know . . . whether you're the real thing . . . or a phoney in a flight suit. . . .

The shimmering waves of vibration were starting now, the probe describing tiny circles in the purple infinity. Just a tap, and they'd know. He'd know, himself. . . . He heard Haskell. "Project X from Ground Control. Are you riding your rudder?"

"Project X Affirmative . . . so far."

"Are you in the controllability phase?"

"Entering it." Mitch tensed his legs.

"Do you intend to check your rudder?"

The question lay heavily on the air waves. Suddenly the indecision was over for Mitch. *You eager so-and-so*, he thought. *Why now? Why not on re-entry, if at all?* A strange, exultant freedom possessed him. "Negative," he said clearly. "I'm taking my feet off the pedals."

He slid his feet to the deck, smiling as the waves of oscillation shimmied down the plane, secure in an almost religious faith that if he gave the Big X her head, she would teeter through the critical altitude.

And she did. With a final shiver she abandoned the support of her useless wings and accepted her metamorphosis into a speeding projectile. Seconds later, at burn-out, she became a silent ballistic missile hurtling through the ionosphere towards space, immutably guided in her soaring arc by the laws of motion and those laws alone: as uncontrollable, until she would re-enter the atmosphere, as if Mitch had been left on the ground. At the moment of burn-out, Mitch became instantly weightless. It was as if an immensely powerful giant had lifted a hand from his chest. The contrast dazed him temporarily, far more than it had on previous flights. He heard himself automatically announce, "Burn-out. Entering free flight at . . ."

The instruments swam before his eyes. Floating gently against his shoulder straps, he peered at the dials. When his vision cleared, he stared at the Machmeter. It was incredible. So carefully had his flight path been planned, so predictable were the celestial laws of force, that he had almost exactly hit his point. The needle of his Machmeter was creeping downward now, as it would until he reached the top point of his journey, but it still hovered near Mach eight.

"Burn-out at Mach eight," he said. "On the button."

"Roger," he heard Haskel say. There would be no more reports other than one at the peak of his flight and one for the flight surgeon, just before his weightless ride would end, on his own condition.

So now he could slip into it—the mystic realm of free flight, the ecstatic universe of motion, of complete surrender to the law that swung the stars and the planets. For six minutes he would be weightless,

detached from his environment. For much shorter times, on previous flights, he had known this ultimate liberty, this visceral freedom, but there was somehow today a new taste to it.

He knew all at once what it was. He had lost his fear. He had emerged from a misty swamp into clear sunshine. Floating weightless against his harness, he almost shouted in relief, and looked about him.

The sky, which he had hardly glimpsed, had turned a darker shade, almost a royal blue. The early sun shone white-hot in the east. He was one with the plane in a soundless, unmoving void. Only his breath, rasping against the pressure of his oxygen, broke utter silence.

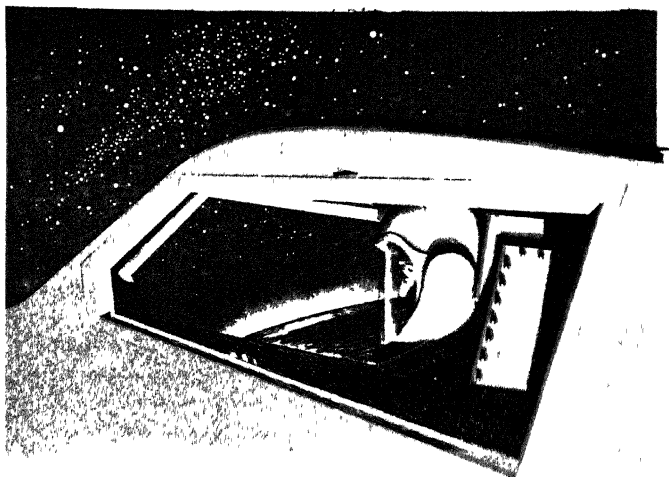
He began to search the purple sky for stars. He found them easily, steady in daylight unfiltered by air. His course was southerly, and the probe of the Big X pointed almost directly at Orion's Belt, its jewels unwinking in the blue. He glanced at his rate of climb—his ascent would slow to zero soon and was decreasing, he knew, at thirty-two feet per second for each second of his flight. Sunlight slashed across half the instrument panel, painting its figures a glaring white. The other half, in shadow, was completely black and unreadable. All through the tiny world of his cockpit this phenomenon had settled; that which was in sunlight was in bright, harsh colour, all else was black. It was a black-and-white world, of incredible, almost unacceptable clarity.

Clarity and truth. His mind fought against its acceptance, fought, here in a reign of absolutes, against the stark onslaught of some chilling force; as if, naked in the limitless void, far from his environment, he was being assailed by a logic too cutting for the human mind to sheathe.

For a moment he glimpsed the light. Whatever delicate, attenuated shadings there were below, there could only be truth in this yawning universe of flight. Man would conquer it, complete his liberation from his world, but he would conquer it, as he had conventional flight, by casting off conjecture and winging steadfastly to the truth. And some men, as they had from Icarus on, would singe their wings and fall.

He glanced at his altimeter. He was approaching his zenith—over 900,000 feet, more than one hundred and seventy miles up. His Mach-meter hovered near 5.0. He glanced to his right and down.

The Pacific stretched limitlessly to the west, like a sheet of sapphire-



tinted glass. Somewhere north of San Francisco an arrow-head of fleecy white clouds was pointed at the coast. He let his eye rove along the map spread below him, down to the tip of Baja California, until he lost the main body of Mexico in the right front corner of his cockpit. To his left, in flat relief, lay the Rockies and the Colorado Plateau.

His altimeter shivered at 970,000 feet and began to settle. He made his report. He had reached the apex of his climb. For a soaring instant he knew absolute unity with the stars above him. Then he began the long, weightless fall back to earth.

THROUGH the tiny jet controls in the wings and nose he had eased the nose down when he felt the plane shiver as the first thin atmosphere began to work on his control surfaces. He had regained his speed in the weightless fall, was hurtling at Mach six when the tiniest hint of resistance pulsed to his hand from the stick. He knew that he had only moments before he truly re-entered the atmosphere through the controllability barrier. He called Ground Control to make his medical report.

"Two hundred thousand feet," he said. "No apparent physical problems."

"Roger," Haskell's voice came back. And then he heard George Vickers's drawl as if in the cockpit, "You mean those cosmic rays haven't made you sterile, son?"

Mitch smiled. "Negative. George, what is your position?"

"I'm at fifty thousand feet, seventy miles north of Nellis. Have you re-entered?"

"Negative," said Mitch. Things would happen fast now. He tensed himself. "Altitude 160,000. Mach seven." He took a deep breath. *Whatever happens, Sue*, he begged silently, *whatever happens, forgive me*. Then, with his heart knocking madly, he raised his feet to the rudder pedals and said, "Ground Control from Project X. I have returned my feet to the rudder pedals. At 130,000 feet, I intend to apply minimal pressure."

Vickers cut in sharply. "Friend, you proved Mach eight and 900,000 feet. Let's go and have a drink."

Proved? What had he proved? That a plane could streak across the sky at eight times the speed of sound, as a missile could, without burning up? But they had known that for years. That a man could sit inside it and live? But that they had guessed. That a pilot could control it at the most critical phase, when it trembled on the brink of space? No. That he had *not* proved. Could a man control it, or would it throw him like an inflamed beast when he tried? Could he guide it or must he trust to luck? That they did not know. That they must know before the next step, before a space vehicle left the drawing-boards. This was elemental; this was a cosmic truth.

He pressed the microphone switch. "Minimal rudder pressure," he went on. "I'll ease it on at the first sign of oscillation." The nose probe trembled, and he knew that he was on the threshold.

Haskell's voice was hesitant. "Well—use your own judgment, Mitch."
"I am."

He settled himself in his seat, his heartbeat heavy in his ears. His headset crackled into life. He heard Ron Eberly. "Mitch, this is Ron. I recommend you skip it until we evaluate this flight." The voice was high-pitched and anxious, and Mitch could visualize him grabbing the microphone from Haskell.

The nose began to waver. Mitch pressed the switch. "Negative. Ron. I'll take a crack at it now. Mach 8.0—130,000 feet."

He forced the oxygen from his lungs, then, with his pulse pounding, let the pressure fill them up. He was ready. As the nose swung left, he firmly and gradually resisted it with rudder pressure.

The Big X, sensitive and highly strung, seemed for a moment to question the command. Like a highly bred race-horse subjected to a spur, she seemed at first unable to grasp the significance of the prick. She trembled as if hurt, and Mitch relaxed the pressure. "Ground Control from Project X. I eased on rudder and felt a slight yaw. Trying again."

He heard Haskel's voice. "Roger. Just play with her, gentle-like, and tell us what you get."

He didn't answer. Once again, as the nose swung, he eased on rudder, this time more firmly. The Big X shook her head angrily, and Mitch relaxed the pressure quickly. His hands were sweating now in his gloves. He was at 126,000 feet, but his Mach number was still hovering at 7.8.

"Ground Control from Project X. With one eighth rudder movement I experienced slight buffeting."

He heard Haskel's voice, somehow sinister now. "Any indication of loss of stability?"

Buffeting alone was no indication of stability loss and when he had eased the pressure the buffeting had stopped. Now the Big X was sweetly and completely tractable. *Except*, Mitch told himself, *I still don't know if she can be yawed at this speed without going completely bottom over teakettle. The hell with it, I've done all I could.*

The headset came alive. "Do you consider the plane stable at that speed when subjected to rudder control forces?" Haskel asked formally.

"I don't know."

"Do you intend to find out?"

Mitch's mouth was parched, and his back ached with tension. He shifted in the seat. The Big X, clean and silent in the vast reaches of space, whispered a thousand tiny things to him. He could hear his tortured breath in his ears, tinny and mechanical in his helmet. He thought of Sue in the motel. But he thought too of the Big X, and the instant of truth at 900,000 feet, of the silent unblinking daylight stars.

Find out? Not for you, Haskel, you slob. For the next guy that flies this thing, and for the rest of us

"Affirmative I'm applying pressure at"—he glanced at the dials—"Mach 7.8, and 120,000 feet." He pressed his left foot more firmly against the throbbing pressure of the pedal.

Then it happened; a dip and a shuddering yaw. He tried to catch control with a quick jerk of his legs; to neutralize the yaw with right rudder. She swung back, far past the centre point, and farther than the yaw he had induced. Now she was swinging her head from side to side like an angered beast, swerving madly as if trying to shake loose the man riding her. No—not the man—the extra weight forward. The black boxes! Mitch heard Vickers's voice, all at once concerned. "Hey, buddy, take it easy."

Now the yaw was slower and more ominous. He felt as if the whole weight of the plane had shifted ahead, as if he were a sculler who had suddenly taken water into the bow of his shell. Three times Mitch tried to cancel the swing, while the altimeter spun crazily. His heart jumped. He pressed the switch: "Ground Control from Project X-Ray. I did it, all right. Ron, she spins. Just plain stalls and spins. And it's round those boxes. You got that?"

He heard Ron instantly. "Roger. Now for God's sake recover."

Mitch heard Vickers. "Mitch—I see you. Look, you're in a damn near vertical spin. Get out!"

Mitch glanced at his altimeter. It was racing to keep up with his descent. Already in the few seconds since he had lost control he'd spun to eighty thousand feet. He saw the Machmeter. Mach seven. Could a man eject at Mach seven and live? No, but better that than—he had a flash of the wreckage of Stace's plane and moved his hand to the jettison lever. Then he took it away.

He could not, with fifteen miles of altitude, abandon this sleek instrument, this marvellous plane. It was worth one more try. He eased the nose down and then tried to pull it up, as if he were a cadet trying to recover from a spin in flight training. The Big X shuddered, reversed, and thrashed wildly into a spin in the opposite direction, cramming him into his seat. His feet were glued to the pedals. His pressure suit, blown

rigid, was fighting the g's. The Big X hugged him to her like a jealous lover intent on suicide.

Through the pounding in his ears he heard Vickers' "For God's sake . . . eject!" Now his chin was sunken immovably into his chest, and he strained to lift it, to peer out. The altimeter spun crazily. Although he sensed that it was too late, that he could never force his hand from the stick to the ejection lever against the implacable giant which fought to force him through the bottom of his cockpit, he tried. His arm barely budged.

When the right wing went, in a sharp crack, the plane flipped over, hurling him against his straps. Through a ruddy veil he glimpsed Lake Mead somehow above him, then a kaleidoscopic whirling terrain of sand and boulders.

For an instant he fought the massive certainty of it all, tense and straining. Then, strangely, he relaxed. In the ultimate moment, he knew that he had had it all—even, finally, love. Impassively he watched the last, horizon-swinging roll and the spinning boulders rush towards him.

And in that last second, Sue was very close.

SUE, IN THE darkened room, had fallen into a drowsy coma. Now she heard footsteps on the concrete patio. She was suddenly alert, her heart knocking.

If it's he, he'll open the door. If it's not, there'll be a knock.

She sat stiff and wide-eyed as the feet halted outside. There was a light tap on the door. *No*, she screamed silently. *No*. . .

She rose swiftly and opened it. It was Brock. For a long moment she stared at him. "Come in," she murmured.

Dully, she sat opposite him, watching his face, dead and ghastly when he began, come alive as he talked. "This you've got to get straight, Sue. This you have to remember. They learned something from him. They learned *why*. He described what happened, and Ron Eberly's got it."

Sue nodded. She was numb, and she blessed the numbness. When it wore off, that would be the time for tears.

"Lots of test pilots are killed without proving a thing, Sue. Mitch discovered something we *had* to know. To go on . . ."

There was a bulky shadow at the open door, and Lou Haskel stood silhouetted against the court. "Miss," he began, and stumbled. "I'm—I'm sorry."

"It's all right, Lou." She watched him shamble back across the court, his shoulders sloping; suddenly an old man.

Zeke was skirting the pool, on the other side of the patio. He walked to her across the space and his eyes never left her face. She motioned mutely for him to enter. Brock stood up. "Sue, I have to get back. I'll see you tonight, and I want you to stay with Nita and me. Will you please?"

Sue smiled. "I'll call her later. Thanks, Brock."

Brock left. Zeke poured drinks and handed one to Sue. He felt in his pocket and took out Mitch's ring. "He left it with me. For you, although he didn't say it."

She held it in her hand. "He tried to leave it this morning. I wouldn't let him."

"He left you love, too. Remember that."

Sue smiled. "He left more than love, Zeke." Some of the numbness was wearing off. "I'm going to have a baby."

He put down his drink and was suddenly on his feet and very close. "Did he know?"

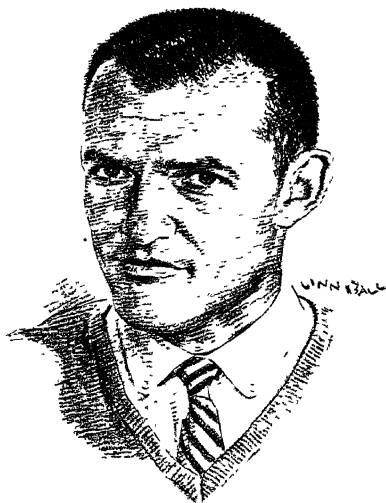
She nodded.

"Are you glad?"

Somewhere far over the desert, a pilot pulled his jet from a supersonic dive, releasing a shock wave like a clap of gunfire. As it jolted a desert shack an already cracked window crashed to the floor. The sonic boom edged a dish off a kitchen shelf in Lancaster. By the time its thunder rolled over the Inn in Palmdale it was a quiet rumble, but Zeke's drink shivered on the coffee table's glass top, as if moved by an unseen hand.

Sue knew that the tears were going to come. She was suddenly thankful the question had been asked.

"Yes," she said, before the tears fought their way up. "Yes. I'm glad."



Hank Searls

HANK SEARLS described *The Big X* as a book "dealing with a plane only slightly more advanced than one that will fly this year or next." His prediction has already been proved correct. For in the autumn of 1959 a North American Aviation X-15 rocket aircraft was successfully tested over the California desert. Released from a B-52 bomber, it soared under its own power to heights above sixty thousand feet. It is designed to carry man on his first flight into space.

Research for *The Big X* posed few problems for Mr. Searls, who for twelve years flew jet aircraft for the U.S. Navy. He has also known many test pilots, and has always been fascinated by these men who, as he says, "take planes that have so far worked only on paper and prove that they work in the sky."

Aviation, he believes, is a very safe method of transport, "but when things go wrong they do so with dramatic impact." He knows: in 1954 he narrowly escaped death in an F9F Panther jet. He is now a full-time author. "I still fly," he says, "but I've had instilled in me a healthy respect for the element."

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